

Ghost 175

Chapter 175: morning noice

Morning sunlight spilled gently into the Empress's courtyard, warm and pale, touching the stone tiles and climbing the carved pillars inch by inch. The palace was unusually quiet at this hour. No ministers shouting. No maids rushing. No urgent bells.

For once, there was peace.

Empress Lian An sat on a low wooden stool near the small table under the shade of a flowering tree. A porcelain plate rested in her lap, piled with fresh fruits—pears, peaches, and slices of apple glistening with morning dew.

She peeled an apple carefully, the knife moving smoothly in her hand.

Across from her—visible only to her—sat three ghosts.

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, floated slightly above the ground, sleeves tucked neatly, posture straight as if he were still attending court lectures. Wei Rong, the general ghost, sat with one leg propped up casually, arms crossed, expression lazy and sharp. And Fen Yu, the female ghost, hovered near the edge of the table, legs swinging in the air, eyes following the fruit with interest.

Lian An sliced the apple into small pieces and held one out.

Fen Yu's eyes lit up.

"For me?" she asked, snatching it eagerly.

"Yes," the Empress said flatly. "Eat slowly."

Fen Yu stuffed it into her mouth anyway.

Li Shen raised a brow. "No manners even in death."

Wei Rong smirked. "She never had manners in life either."

Fen Yu choked. "Hey!"

The Empress sighed and peeled another fruit.

She handed a slice to Li Shen, then another to Wei Rong.

Wei Rong took it, examined it thoughtfully, and said, "Hm. Smaller than hers."

"That's because you eat like a beast," the Empress replied. "You don't need more."

Fen Yu laughed loudly. "Serves you right!"

Wei Rong flicked his finger at her forehead. "Careful."

Fen Yu yelped. "You bully!"

Li Shen added calmly, "Objectively speaking, you provoke him first."

Fen Yu spun toward him. "You too?!"

The Empress's knife paused mid-air.

She inhaled slowly.

Very slowly.

"Enough," she said.

They ignored her.

Wei Rong leaned back. "If she didn't flirt with random ghost men and get us beaten, maybe we'd be nicer."

Fen Yu's face flushed. "That was ONE time!"

"One time that got us thrown into a dungeon," Li Shen said dryly.

"I didn't know he was married!" Fen Yu snapped.

"And we told you something was wrong," Wei Rong said. "You never listen."

Fen Yu's eyes glistened. "So you punish me forever?"

The Empress slammed the knife into the table.

The sound cracked through the courtyard like thunder.

All three ghosts froze.

Lian An stood up slowly.

Her expression was calm—but her eyes were sharp.

"I cook for you," she said quietly. "I feed you. I protect you. I clean up your messes. I take responsibility when you cause trouble."

She pointed the knife toward them—not threatening, but firm.

"And still, every single day, you fight like children."

Wei Rong opened his mouth.

"Don't," she said.

Li Shen lowered his gaze.

Fen Yu sniffed loudly, crossing her arms.

"No one cares about me anyway," Fen Yu muttered. "You two just gang up on me."

Lian An turned to her.

"That's not true."

Fen Yu laughed bitterly. "Isn't it? Every time something happens, it's my fault. I'm stupid. I'm reckless. I'm emotional."

Wei Rong shrugged. "You are emotional."

The Empress's glare snapped to him.

"Apologize."

Wei Rong blinked. "What?"

"Say sorry," she repeated.

He scoffed. "Why should I?"

"Because you always bully her," Lian An said. "And you know it."

Wei Rong tilted his head. "She brings it on herself."

Li Shen sighed. "General, perhaps—"

Wei Rong waved him off. "You stay out of this."

Fen Yu's shoulders shook.

"No one cares," she said again, louder this time. "Even when I try, I'm just a burden."

Lian An's anger faded, replaced by something heavier.

She put the knife down.

She walked to Fen Yu and knelt so they were eye to eye.

"Look at me," she said.

Fen Yu hesitated, then did.

"I care," the Empress said. "I wouldn't yell if I didn't."

Fen Yu's lips trembled.

"You don't understand," Fen Yu whispered. "I died young. I never had a family. I never had a child. I never even got married."

Li Shen stiffened.

Wei Rong looked away.

"They killed me," Fen Yu continued, tears spilling freely now. "My fiancé cheated on me. His lover poisoned me. No one knew. No one cared. I died quietly."

Her voice broke.

"I thought... at least in death, I'd belong somewhere."

Silence wrapped the courtyard.

Li Shen closed his eyes.

Wei Rong clenched his fist.

Lian An hugged her.

Not carefully. Not politely.

She pulled Fen Yu into her chest and held her tightly.

"I was alone too," she said softly. "Before this life. My parents died early. I worked nonstop. I never dated. I never built a family."

Fen Yu sobbed harder.

"When I transmigrated," Lian An continued, "I thought I'd be alone again."

She tightened her embrace.

"Then I met you three."

Li Shen's throat tightened.

Wei Rong exhaled sharply.

"You're annoying," the Empress said quietly, "reckless, loud, troublesome."

Fen Yu sniffed. "That's not comforting..."

"But you're mine," Lian An finished. "All three of you."

Li Shen looked away, hiding his expression.

Wei Rong rubbed his face. "Tch."

Fen Yu laughed weakly through tears.

Li Shen cleared his throat. "We... may have been too harsh."

Wei Rong muttered, "Sorry."

Fen Yu froze. "What?"

"I said sorry," he repeated gruffly. "Don't make me say it again."

She stared, then smiled through tears.

"Accepted."

Li Shen chuckled softly. "Peace treaty achieved."

Fen Yu grabbed another fruit slice. "I'm still eating more than you."

Wei Rong snorted. "Dream on."

Lian An laughed.

The tension dissolved, replaced by warmth.

As Fen Yu finally ate properly, Li Shen told a ridiculous story about a ghost who tried to possess a pig and failed.

Wei Rong laughed so hard he fell through the bench.

Fen Yu nearly choked laughing.

And for a brief, rare moment—

They weren't Empress and ghosts.

They were just a strange, broken little family sharing fruit in the morning sun.

The courtyard was quiet when the maid arrived.

She bowed low, her voice cautious.

"Your Majesty, the Dowager Empress requests your presence in her courtyard. She said she has an announcement to make."

Lian An's hand paused mid-movement.

The maid did not linger. After delivering the message, she retreated quickly, as if afraid to stay longer than necessary.

The Empress slowly lifted her gaze and turned toward the empty space beside her.

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves.

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

Fen Yu tilted her head.

All three shrugged at the same time.

"No idea," Wei Rong said bluntly.

Fen Yu frowned. "That woman never calls you for good reasons."

Li Shen nodded. "Historically speaking, every time she summons you, it ends with punishment or humiliation."

Lian An exhaled softly.

She stood up, smoothing her sleeves, her expression unreadable.

"She never visited me even when I was 'sick,'" she said quietly. "She never spoke a word. Only sent punishments from afar."

Fen Yu snorted. "Typical."

"And now she suddenly wants me there," Lian An continued. "With an announcement."

Wei Rong scoffed. "Sounds dangerous."

Lian An's lips curved into a faint, calm smile.

"Then we'll hear it."

She straightened her posture.

"Let's go see what she wants."

The ghosts followed silently, hovering close as she walked toward the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

The atmosphere changed the moment she stepped inside.

The Dowager Empress's courtyard was always crowded—but today, it felt deliberately so.

Concubines sat in neat rows.

Lady Chen sat near the front, posture graceful, expression composed.

Shin Gu sat slightly to the side, quiet and reserved, her eyes lowered.

Princess Zhi was arriving from the opposite path.

When Lian An entered, the chatter softened—but no one stood.

No one greeted her.

No one bowed.

She noticed it immediately.

She did not react.

She walked forward calmly and took her seat.

Princess Zhi arrived moments later. Unlike the others, she paused when she saw Lian An and offered a gentle nod.

Lian An returned it.

They sat side by side.

Only then did Princess Zhi whisper softly,

"Are you all right?"

Lian An nodded. "I am."

Princess Zhi hesitated, then asked, "Do you know why Her Majesty summoned us?"

Lian An shook her head.

"No."

Princess Zhi's fingers tightened slightly in her lap.

"I was called as well... but no explanation was given."

Lian An glanced around the courtyard.

Every seat was filled.

Every face was carefully arranged.

Every smile looked practiced.

This wasn't a casual gathering.

This was intentional.

Fen Yu hovered close to Lian An's shoulder and muttered, "This feels like a trap."

Li Shen's voice was calm but tense. "Whatever the announcement is, it concerns everyone here."

Wei Rong's gaze sharpened. "Be careful."

Lian An folded her hands neatly in her lap.

She had learned long ago that reacting first was a mistake.

If the Dowager Empress wanted an audience—

Then she would listen.

And whatever came next, she would face it head-on.

The courtyard fell into complete silence.

All eyes slowly turned toward the main seat.

The Dowager Empress had yet to speak.