

Ghost 200

Chapter 200: morning tea

Morning light slipped gently through the lattice windows, painting pale gold patterns across the Empress's bed. She stirred, half-awake, half-lost in a pleasant dream where no one demanded reports, festivals, or embroidery samples.

Unfortunately, peace never lasted long.

"Wake up."

The voice was sharp, impatient, and far too close.

The Empress groaned and pulled the quilt over her head. "Fen Yu... if you don't let me sleep for five more minutes, I'll burn incense for someone else."

"That won't scare me," Fen Yu replied smugly. "I already died once."

Wei Rong's deep voice followed, calm but annoyingly amused. "It's morning. The sun is up. Birds are chirping. You're being lazy."

Li Shen sighed dramatically. "Such a waste of daylight. In my time, scholars rose before dawn to recite classics."

The quilt was yanked down.

The Empress shot upright, hair a mess, eyes blazing. "WHO TOUCHED MY BLANKET?"

Three ghosts floated in front of her bed, perfectly innocent expressions on their faces.

Fen Yu even clasped her hands. "Good morning."

The Empress glared at them for a long second... then collapsed back onto the pillow. "I should've let that monk seal all of you."

Wei Rong laughed softly. "You'd miss us."

"No," she muttered. "I'd sleep."

Despite her complaints, she eventually rose, washed her face, and changed into a simple morning robe. By the time she stepped into the small dining area of her courtyard, servants had already set out breakfast—warm porridge, steamed buns, pickled vegetables, and tea.

The Empress sat down, spoon in hand.

Three ghosts hovered expectantly around the table.

Fen Yu leaned forward. "So?"

"So what?" the Empress asked, blowing on her porridge.

"Our share," Fen Yu said sweetly.

"You had food last night."

"That was last night," Fen Yu replied. "This is morning."

Wei Rong nodded gravely. "Different meal. Different rules."

Li Shen added, "Routine is important."

The Empress scooped a spoonful and held it out. "You're all unbelievable."

Fen Yu beamed and immediately leaned in, absorbing the warmth and essence from the food. "Mmm. Breakfast tastes better when stolen."

Wei Rong reached for a bun, pretending to chew. "This one's good. Soft."

Li Shen hovered closer, hands behind his back. "The porridge has the right consistency today."

The Empress paused mid-bite. "...How would you know? You don't even have a tongue."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Experience."

Fen Yu suddenly pointed at Wei Rong. "Hey! You're getting more than me!"

Wei Rong raised an eyebrow. "Strength requires nourishment."

Fen Yu scoffed. "Excuses. You just like bullying me."

She turned dramatically toward the Empress. "Did you hear that? He's bullying a fragile, beautiful woman."

The Empress choked on her tea. "Fragile?"

Wei Rong laughed openly now. "You once chased a hundred-year-old ghost through three streets."

"That was self-defense!"

Li Shen tilted his head thoughtfully. "Debatable."

Fen Yu spun toward him. "You're on his side now?"

"I'm on the side of truth," Li Shen replied serenely.

Fen Yu gasped. "Traitor."

The Empress watched them bicker, spoon paused halfway to her mouth, a smile slowly tugging at her lips.

"You know," she said, "from the outside, I probably look like a madwoman smiling at thin air."

Fen Yu grinned. "Good. Keeps people away."

Wei Rong added, "Safety through reputation."

Li Shen nodded. "An effective strategy."

The Empress laughed quietly, the sound soft and genuine. For a moment, the worries of the palace—the festival, the Dowager, the shadows lurking unseen—felt distant.

She finished her breakfast, pushing the bowl aside. "Alright. Enough eating. I have work today."

Fen Yu floated upside down in front of her face. "Embroidery?"

The Empress groaned. "Don't remind me."

Wei Rong smirked. "Your stitches look like battle scars."

Li Shen added helpfully, "Abstract art."

The Empress grabbed a bun and threw it straight through Fen Yu's head. "All of you—out."

Fen Yu laughed, unoffended. "Fine, fine. But don't forget lunch."

Wei Rong saluted lazily. "We'll be watching."

Li Shen bowed slightly. "Good luck surviving the day."

As they drifted away, still teasing and arguing among themselves, the Empress shook her head, smiling despite herself.

No matter how chaotic things became... at least her mornings were never lonely.

The Empress had barely finished wiping her hands when a strange pressure settled over her courtyard.

It wasn't the heavy, suffocating darkness she had felt before when something sinister moved within the palace. This was different—sharp, alert, disciplined. The air itself felt guarded, as if invisible blades had been drawn.

She straightened instinctively.

At the edge of her vision, the curtains fluttered though there was no wind.

Then—

footsteps.

Not one.

Not two.

Four.

The Empress turned just as four figures stepped into her courtyard.

They were dressed in dark, fitted clothes—neither palace robes nor commoner garments. Their movements were silent, controlled, practiced. Each of them wore a plain black mask that covered the upper half of their faces, leaving only their mouths visible.

The courtyard gates had not been announced.

No maid had called out.

Her heart skipped.

"Who are you?" the Empress demanded, her voice calm but sharp.

Behind her, chaos erupted.

"ENEMY—!"

"AMBUSH—!"

"WHY ARE THERE HUMANS HERE—?!"

Fen Yu shrieked and immediately dove behind a pillar, clutching it as if her afterlife depended on it. Wei Rong vanished straight into the shadows of the roof beam, his spiritual aura tightening like drawn steel. Li Shen flickered behind the bookshelf, muttering urgently about formations and tactical disadvantage.

The Empress resisted the urge to yell at them.

The four masked figures stopped three steps away from her.

None of them moved to attack.

One of them—taller, broad-shouldered—raised a hand in a slow, deliberate gesture of peace.

The Empress narrowed her eyes. "This is the Empress's courtyard. Remove your masks and state your purpose. Now."

For a moment, silence stretched thin as a wire.

Then—

The second figure from the left let out a soft laugh.

"Oh wow," a familiar voice said. "She sounds even scarier in the palace."

The Empress froze.

That voice—

The masked figure reached up and removed the mask.

"Surprise."

Yao Qing grinned at her.

The Empress stared. Blinked once. Twice.

"...You."

Yao Qing's smile widened. "Missed me?"

Before the Empress could respond, the other three figures removed their masks one by one.

Two identical faces appeared next—bright-eyed, grinning shamelessly.

"Good morning, Sister!"

"Did we scare you?"

The twins waved enthusiastically.

Finally, the last figure removed his mask.

He bowed deeply, respectful and composed. "Your Majesty."

The new man—calm, sharp-eyed, and serious—stood straight, his presence steady.

For three full seconds, the Empress said nothing.

Then—

"YOU—!"

She took a step forward, then another.

"—ARE YOU ALL INSANE?!"

Fen Yu popped her head out from behind the pillar. "Wait... these are friends?"

Wei Rong leaned out from the roof beam. "You couldn't tell us earlier?"

Li Shen sighed in relief, floating back into view. "I was preparing a counter-array."

The Empress pointed accusingly at the four intruders. "Do you have any idea what happens if someone sees you enter like this?! This is the inner palace!"

Yao Qing crossed her arms. "Relax. We planned it."

"That does not reassure me!"

The twins spoke at the same time.

"We came through the side passage."

"The one near the old plum wall."

"No guards today."

"We counted."

The Empress rubbed her temples. "You counted guards."

The new man cleared his throat politely. "We rotated disguises twice on the way in. No one followed us. No spiritual traces either."

Her anger stalled.

"...You were careful."

Yao Qing tilted her head smugly. "Of course. You think we'd be stupid enough to stroll into the palace unprepared?"

Fen Yu floated closer to the Empress and whispered loudly, "I like her."

Wei Rong nodded. "She's reckless but competent."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves. "A rare combination."

The Empress exhaled slowly. "Why are you here?"

Yao Qing's expression softened.

"We were worried."

The Empress looked at her.

"About you," Yao Qing continued, quieter now. "Too many things happening. The palace. Princess Zhi. Dark cultivators. We couldn't just sit at the Whisper Bowl pretending everything was fine."

The twins nodded.

"And the restaurant is stable now."

"The renovation is done."

"Staff are trained."

"The scholar is managing well."

The Empress felt a small, warm knot loosen in her chest.

"You didn't have to come," she said, more gently.

Yao Qing snorted. "Yes, we did."

The new man stepped forward slightly. "Your Majesty, we also... felt something."

The Empress's eyes sharpened. "What kind of something?"

"A disturbance," he said carefully. "Like pressure. Like being watched. Not ghostly—but not human either."

Behind her, all three ghosts stiffened.

Fen Yu whispered, "She felt it too..."

Wei Rong's voice was low. "That confirms it."

Li Shen nodded grimly. "Multiple confirmations strengthen the hypothesis."

The Empress turned back to them. "You felt it where?"

Yao Qing gestured vaguely. "Everywhere. The city. The palace walls. Even the road here."

The twins added:

"Like someone breathing down your neck."

"But never showing their face."

Silence settled again.

The Empress closed her eyes briefly.

So it wasn't just her.

"You shouldn't stay long," she said at last. "This place is dangerous right now."

Yao Qing stepped closer, her gaze steady. "That's exactly why we're staying."

The twins grinned.

"You're not getting rid of us."

"Not again."

The new man bowed once more. "If Your Majesty allows, we'll remain discreet. Hidden. Useful."

Fen Yu suddenly popped between them. "She allows."

The Empress shot her a look. "You don't decide."

Fen Yu shrugged. "You were going to say yes anyway."

Wei Rong smirked. "She's predictable."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "In the best way."

The Empress sighed, defeated.

"...Fine."

Yao Qing's face lit up instantly. "Good. Then first—"

She pulled something from inside her sleeve.

A small pouch.

"We brought this."

The Empress opened it.

Inside lay dried herbs, talismans, and a thin strip of carved jade etched with protective runes.

Her breath caught.

"This is—"

"For you," Yao Qing said simply. "Just in case."

The Empress closed her fingers around the pouch.

For the first time that morning, her voice softened completely.

"Thank you."

Behind her, three ghosts exchanged glances.

Fen Yu smiled. "She found more people who don't want her dead."

Wei Rong nodded. "Good."

Li Shen folded his hands. "The board is filling."

The Empress looked at the four familiar faces standing in her courtyard, unmasked, unafraid, and stubbornly loyal.

The palace suddenly felt a little less suffocating.

But deep within the walls—

Something shifted.

Watching.

Waiting.

And for the first time, it realized:

She was no longer alone.