

Ghost 275

Chapter 275: The Price of Independence

Morning sunlight filtered gently into the palace courtyard.

The air was calm.

Peaceful.

As if nothing dark had ever touched these walls.

—

Inside the Empress's courtyard, breakfast was laid neatly.

Warm porridge.

Light dishes.

Fresh fruits.

—

The Empress sat quietly.

Across from her—

Princess Zhi.

—

Unlike before—

There was no heavy atmosphere.

No pain.

No grief.

—

Just quiet companionship.

—

Princess Zhi smiled softly.

"I missed you."

—

The Empress looked up slightly.

"...I was only gone for a few days."

—

"It felt longer."

—

The Empress paused.

Then smiled faintly.

—

"I missed you too."

—

Princess Zhi's eyes softened.

"Tell me everything."

—

And so—

The Empress spoke.

—

About the wedding.

The preparations.

The laughter.

—

"The banquet was lively."

"Everyone was happy."

"I... enjoyed it."

—

Princess Zhi listened quietly.

Her expression peaceful.

—

"And I got new clothes."

"Jewelry."

"Shoes."

—

The Empress paused slightly.

"...There are still some I haven't worn."

—

Her fingers tightened faintly around her bowl.

—

Because—

She remembered.

—

Those gifts.

—

From him.

—

The Emperor.

—

For a moment—

Her thoughts drifted.

—

"...He gave me those..."

"...Why?"

—

She lowered her gaze.

—

"...He never did before."

—

A bitter thought rose.

—

"...He did everything for Lady Chen..."

"...And now suddenly..."

—

She clenched her fingers slightly.

—

"...Why now?"

—

Her heart—

Didn't feel light.

—

It felt—

Confused.

—

Heavy.

—

"...I thought..."

"...maybe..."

—

She stopped herself.

—

"...No."

—

Her expression hardened slightly.

—

"I was wrong."

—

Princess Zhi noticed the shift.

"...What are you thinking?"

—

The Empress didn't answer immediately.

—

Instead—

She spoke slowly.

—

"I've decided something."

—

Princess Zhi frowned slightly.

"...What?"

—

The Empress lifted her gaze.

—

"I will leave."

—

Silence.

—

Princess Zhi froze.

"...Leave?"

—

"Yes."

—

Her voice was calm.

Too calm.

—

"I will divorce him."

—

The words—

Fell like stones.

—

Princess Zhi stared at her.

"...Why?"

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

But it didn't reach her eyes.

—

"I don't belong here."

—

"I don't want to depend on anyone."

—

"I want my own life."

—

Her voice grew softer.

—

"...Maybe I'll run my restaurant."

"...Or..."

—

She paused.

—

"...Meet someone who truly loves me."

—

Princess Zhi's heart tightened.

—

"Don't say that so easily..."

—

The Empress didn't respond.

—

Because her mind—

Was already drifting far away.

—

Away from the palace.

Away from expectations.

—

Toward something free.

—

But before anything could be said—

—

Footsteps approached.

—

Guards.

—

"Her Majesty the Dowager summons you."

—

The atmosphere shifted instantly.

—

Princess Zhi frowned.

"...Now?"

—

The guard bowed.

"Yes."

—

Princess Zhi turned to the Empress.

"You should go."

—

"...Don't make her wait."

—

The Empress nodded.

—

And stood.

—

The Dowager's Courtyard

The air here—

Was different.

—

Cold.

Heavy.

Strict.

—

The moment the Empress entered—

She bowed.

—

"Greetings—"

—

Before she could finish—

—

A sharp sound cut through the air.

—

Crash.

—

A teacup.

—

Thrown.

—

It struck her.

—

Hot tea spilled across her clothes.

—

The shattered pieces scattered across the floor—

One cutting into her foot.

—

She flinched.

—

Pain shot through her leg.

—

But she didn't move.

—

"...Mother—"

—

"Silence."

—

The Dowager's voice was cold.

Sharp.

Filled with anger.

—

"Every time I try to believe you are improving..."

—

"You prove me wrong."

—

The Empress stood still.

"...What have I done?"

—

The Dowager laughed.

—

"What have you done?"

—

Her gaze turned piercing.

—

"The Whisper Bowl."

—

Silence.

—

The Empress froze.

—

"...You opened it."

—

"...Without permission."

—

The Empress's mind raced.

—

"...Who told her?"

—

But then—

She exhaled slowly.

—

"...It doesn't matter."

—

She lifted her gaze.

—

"Yes."

—

"I opened it."

—

The Dowager's eyes darkened.

—

"...Why?"

—

The Empress answered calmly.

—

"Because I don't want to depend on anyone."

—

"I want to stand on my own."

—

The Dowager laughed again.

—

Mocking.

—

"So you are mocking my son?"

—

"He gave you everything."

—

"Clothes."

"Jewelry."

"Status."

—

"What more do you want?"

—

The Empress remained silent.

—

Because—

She didn't want those things.

—

And saying that—

Would only make things worse.

—

The Dowager's voice dropped.

—

"Answer me."

—

The Empress spoke quietly.

—

"...I didn't open it for wealth."

—

"I opened it for myself."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

The Dowager's expression changed.

—

Colder.

—

"...Then choose."

—

The Empress's eyes lifted.

—

"Leave the Whisper Bowl."

—

"...Or leave the palace."

—

The words echoed.

—

Heavy.

Final.

—

But—

The Empress didn't hesitate.

—

"...I won't give up the Whisper Bowl."

—

Silence.

—

Even the servants froze.

—

The Dowager's eyes widened slightly.

—

"...What did you say?"

—

The Empress stood straight.

—

"I won't give it up."

—

"...But I can leave the palace."

—

Silence.

—

Complete silence.

—

The Dowager stared at her.

—

For a moment—

She was speechless.

—

"...You are giving up the title of Empress?"

—

"Yes."

—

The answer was immediate.

—

The Dowager's expression shifted.

—

Not anger.

—

Shock.

—

"...At a time like this?"

—

"Do you know what people will say?"

—

The Empress didn't respond.

—

Because she didn't care.

—

For the first time—

She truly didn't care.

—

But then—

The Dowager spoke again.

—

"No."

—

The Empress looked up.

—

"You will not leave."

—

"...Not now."

—

Her voice turned firm.

Commanding.

—

"You will stay."

—

"And you will learn."

—

The Empress's brows furrowed slightly.

"...Learn what?"

—

The Dowager stepped forward.

—

"Discipline."

—

"From today—"

—

"You will wear plain clothes."

—

"Eat simple meals."

—

"And serve at the shrine."

—

"Until you understand your place."

—

Silence.

—

The Empress stood still.

—

"...A punishment."

—

She had been ready to leave.

—

But now—

—

She was being held back.

—

Bound.

—

Controlled.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...Why not just let me go..."

—

But she didn't say it.

—

Because she knew—

The Dowager would never allow her to leave so easily.

—

This wasn't about punishment.

—

This was about control.

—

About keeping her—

In place.

—

The Empress lowered her head.

—

"...I understand."

—

The Dowager nodded.

—

"Good."

—

"Go."

—

The Empress turned.

—

Her steps slow.

Steady.

—

Each step—

Heavy.

—

But her eyes—

Clear.

—

Because deep inside—

Her decision had already been made.

—

This punishment—

Would not break her.

—

It would only delay her.

—

And when the time came—

—

She would leave.

—

On her own terms.

—

No matter what.

Chapter — A Heart That Quietly Breaks

The Emperor sat in his study, brush in hand, eyes fixed on a document.

But his mind—

Was not there.

Not on the court.

Not on governance.

—

Something had been unsettling him since morning.

—

Then—

A shadow appeared.

One of his guards.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

He didn't look up.

"Speak."

—

The guard hesitated.

Then—

"Her Majesty... went to the Dowager's courtyard."

—

The Emperor's hand paused.

—

"And?"

—

The guard continued,

"The Dowager... punished her."

—

Silence.

—

The brush slipped slightly in his fingers.

Ink stained the paper.

—

"...What punishment?"

—

"Simple clothes."

"Two meals."

"Service at the shrine."

—

The Emperor stood abruptly.

—

"...What?"

—

His voice—

Low.

Dangerous.

—

"And..."

The guard swallowed.

"...The Dowager spoke about the Whisper Bowl."

—

The Emperor's gaze darkened instantly.

—

"...Who told her?"

—

The guard lowered his head.

"We don't know, Your Majesty."

—

But the Emperor already understood.

—

This wasn't coincidence.

—

This was planned.

—

He didn't waste another second.

—

"Prepare."

—

And without waiting—

He left.

—

Dowager's Courtyard

The Dowager sat calmly.

Tea in hand.

—

As if nothing had happened.

—

But the moment she heard footsteps—

She smiled faintly.

—

"...He came."

—

The Emperor entered.

His aura—

Sharp.

Cold.

—

He didn't greet.

Didn't bow.

—

"...Mother."

—

The word carried tension.

—

The Dowager placed her cup down.

"You came quickly."

—

"...Why did you punish her?"

—

Direct.

—

The Dowager raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

—

"So now you question me?"

—

The Emperor stepped forward.

—

"I gave her permission."

—

"To open the restaurant."

—

"I have no issue with it."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

The Dowager laughed.

—

Soft.

Mocking.

—

"...So you are taking her side now."

—

The Emperor didn't deny it.

—

"I am stating the truth."

—

The Dowager leaned slightly forward.

—

"Do you know what she said?"

—

The Emperor frowned slightly.

—

"When I asked her to choose..."

—

"...Between you and the restaurant..."

—

She smiled.

—

"She chose to leave."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor froze.

—

"...What?"

—

The word came out quietly.

—

"...She said she would leave the palace."

—

"Leave the title."

—

"Leave you."

—

Each word—

Hit.

—

The Emperor stood still.

—

For the first time—

There was no control.

—

No composure.

—

Just—

Shock.

—

"...No..."

—

His voice was barely above a whisper.

—

"She wouldn't..."

—

But deep inside—

He knew.

—

She would.

—

Because she never held onto him.

—

Not like he had begun to hold onto her.

—

"...Am I..."

—

He didn't finish the thought.

—

But the question remained.

—

"...Am I that insignificant to her?"

—

The Dowager watched him quietly.

—

"...You are late."

—

The Emperor's jaw tightened.

—

"I will remove the punishment."

—

The Dowager's expression hardened.

—

"No."

—

"This is my decision."

—

"You cannot undo it."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's hands clenched slightly.

—

"...Then I will speak to her."

—

The Dowager nodded.

—

"Go."

—

"See for yourself."

—

"...What she has chosen."

—

Empress's Courtyard

The atmosphere—

Was heavy.

—

Silent.

—

Empty.

—

Inside the chamber—

The Empress stood still.

—

Servants surrounded her.

—

Removing.

—

Jewelry.

Hairpins.

Silk robes.

—

Each piece—

Taken away.

—

As if stripping away her identity.

—

As if reducing her—

To nothing.

—

She didn't resist.

—

Didn't speak.

—

Didn't react.

—

Because inside—

Something had already broken.

—

"...So this is how it ends..."

—

Not with anger.

Not with tears.

—

But with quiet.

—

With acceptance.

—

The maid held a simple cloth.

Plain.

Rough.

—

"...Wear this."

—

The Empress nodded.

—

She changed.

—

From elegance—

To simplicity.

—

From Empress—

To nothing.

—

The ghosts stood nearby.

Silent.

—

For once—

No teasing.

No jokes.

—

Only—

Pain.

—

Fen Yu whispered,

"...Say something."

—

The Empress didn't respond.

—

The scholar ghost looked away.

—

The general clenched his fists.

—

"...This is wrong."

—

But none of them could change it.

—

Because this wasn't physical.

—

This was—

Emotional.

—

And deeper.

—

Then—

Footsteps.

—

The door opened.

—

The Emperor entered.

—

His eyes searched immediately.

—

And then—

He saw her.

—

Standing there.

—

In plain clothes.

—

No jewelry.

No ornaments.

—

Simple.

Fragile.

—

And yet—

More distant than ever.

—

His chest tightened.

—

"...