

Ghost 80

Chapter 80: the emperor night walk

The capital slept under a veil of silver mist.

Inside the palace, lanterns burned late in the Hall of Governance.

Stacks of petitions and reports covered the Emperor's desk — papers on border security, trade taxation, the wounded Duke's recovery. Emperor Rong Zhen sat hunched forward, shoulders taut, a thin vein pulsing at his temple.

The war along the southern road had unsettled everything — merchants' caravans halted, supply lines stretched, soldiers demanding reinforcements. Every decision weighed the balance between safety and revolt.

He had not eaten properly in two days.

A cup of untouched tea cooled beside him.

When the final court messenger departed, he leaned back, closing his eyes. For a few moments, the hum of his thoughts dulled.

"Your Majesty."

The familiar voice snapped him awake. General Wei Han, his long-time friend and confidant, stood by the column, smirking faintly.

"Still buried in scrolls? You'll turn into a ghost before the next sunrise."

Rong Zhen rubbed his brow. "The south won't guard itself."

Wei Han crossed the room and dropped a small scroll on the desk. "Then let it breathe a little. I dragged you out for a walk. The garden's air might remind you that humans need rest too."

The Emperor sighed but relented. "Fine. One round."

Afternoon Respite

The garden shimmered with light as the two men walked through the rows of plum blossoms. Lady Chen awaited them near the pavilion, dressed in soft lilac silk, her expression sweet and polished.

"Your Majesty," she greeted, bowing. "You've been indoors all day. The air here is good for clearing the mind."

Rong Zhen nodded curtly. "Perhaps."

She poured tea, her voice light, cautious. Wei Han, ever the gentleman, stepped back a few paces to give them the illusion of privacy.

Lady Chen chatted about trivial things — new flowers blooming near the lake, a performance troupe visiting the city, how Princess Zhi's pregnancy seemed smoother now. Her laughter tinkled like chimes, perfectly measured.

Rong Zhen smiled faintly when necessary but said little.

His mind wandered — to border fortresses, to the Duke recovering in the south, and to a pale face he had not seen since the night of the storm.

When Lady Chen offered a plate of almond cakes, he declined softly. "Thank you, but I have no appetite."

Wei Han returned a while later, sensing the quiet tension, and changed the topic. "The palace must be calmer now, Your Majesty. I heard the Empress Dowager finally disciplined the Empress."

Rong Zhen looked up, brows knitting. "Disciplined?"

Wei Han shrugged. "Punished her, rather. She's confined in the ancestral hall, copying scriptures for three days. Only porridge for meals."

Lady Chen's fan paused mid-wave, but she said nothing.

The Emperor exhaled through his nose. "The Dowager told me she would punish her."

Wei Han chuckled. "A harsh lesson for a sharp-tongued wife. But perhaps it's needed. The nobles say she grew outrageous lately."

Rong Zhen's jaw tightened. "Outrageous?"

"You know how rumors spread," Wei Han said. "But people whisper that she slapped Lady Chen and shoved you before witnesses. The Dowager feared the ministers would talk, so she acted quickly."

Rong Zhen leaned back, eyes closing briefly. "I told her I would handle it... but she never listens."

He waved his hand, dismissing the matter, though something dark flickered across his expression. "It's better this way. Perhaps solitude will teach her restraint."

Wei Han smiled awkwardly. "Indeed."

They talked of other things afterward — battle formations, council reforms — and when evening fell, Lady Chen excused herself gracefully.

The Emperor returned to his study, but the calm he sought never came.

Restless

By midnight, the candle flames wavered low, his ink brush dry.

He had tried reading reports, writing decrees, but the words blurred uselessly.

His thoughts kept circling back to that one name.

Lian An.

He imagined her kneeling in the cold ancestral hall, her delicate hands copying scripture lines under torchlight. The Dowager's punishments were infamous — designed less for correction, more for humiliation.

Was she enduring it quietly? Crying? Fainting?

He frowned, annoyed by the questions.

Why did he care?

She had defied him before the entire court. She had struck someone under his protection. She had shouted at him, accused him of betrayal.

And yet...

A strange unease settled under his ribs. The kind that words could not reason away.

He stood abruptly, the chair scraping back. "Prepare a lantern," he ordered the attendant outside. "I'm going for a walk."

The eunuch blinked. "At this hour, Your Majesty?"

"Yes."

"Should I—"

"No guards. No one follows."

He needed air — or perhaps, he simply needed to see the truth for himself.

The Ancestral Hall

The night was cold, the moon half-veiled by drifting clouds.

Rong Zhen's footsteps echoed softly along the stone path as he made his way to the far end of the inner court. The ancestral hall loomed ahead — dark, solemn, ringed by flickering lamps.

He dismissed the gate guards with a nod and stepped inside.

The air smelled of incense and candle smoke.

At the center of the hall knelt Lian An, her back straight despite the exhaustion etched into every line of her figure. The lamplight painted her in amber and shadow, her face calm but pale, her hands ink-stained and trembling as she wrote.

Stacks of scrolls surrounded her — dozens, maybe hundreds — each filled with meticulous script.

For a long time, he said nothing.

He watched the way her shoulders rose and fell, the faint tremor in her wrist, the quiet strength that refused to crumble.

Finally, he spoke. "You still haven't finished?"

Her brush paused mid-stroke.

When she turned, surprise flickered across her face — then froze into something colder. "Your Majesty."

"You should rest," he said, stepping closer. "You've done enough. If you apologize to the Dowager — to me, and to Lady Chen — I'll ask her to forgive you. You can stop this."

Her expression hardened instantly. "Apologize?"

"Yes," he said evenly. "One word of remorse, and this ends. You've already paid enough."

She rose slowly to her knees, the chain of her jade ornament glinting in the light. "And for what crime must I beg forgiveness?"

"For your behavior," he said tightly. "You humiliated the court, you struck Lady Chen, you—"

"I defended my father!" Her voice cracked through the hall, raw and furious. "He was bleeding to death in the south while you dined on peace and policy! You would have me bow and smile through that?"

Her hand shook, pointing toward the tablets. "Tell me, Your Majesty, would you kneel politely if your mother lay dying? If you learned your kin was shot by those you trusted?"

He flinched slightly, then straightened. "Watch your tone."

Her laughter came low and bitter. "Of course. The Emperor must never be questioned. The Empress must kneel until her knees bleed and still smile sweetly."

He clenched his jaw. "You forget yourself."

"I forget nothing," she said, eyes glinting. "You forget. You forgot your wife the moment she became inconvenient to your politics."

The silence that followed was sharp enough to draw blood.

He exhaled, stepping closer, lowering his tone. "Enough. This will only make things worse. Just say sorry. I'll end this tonight."

Lian An met his gaze, unflinching. "No."

"You're being childish."

"I'm being alive."

Her words hit like an arrow.

"I will not beg for forgiveness I do not owe," she continued, voice trembling but fierce. "I will not kneel to please your mother, nor flatter your favorite. I am the Empress, not a doll to be scolded and dressed for display. Let her punish me — I will write her scriptures. But I will not bow to lies."

Her breathing was uneven now, but her eyes shone with that same unyielding flame that had once drawn him to her.

For a heartbeat, neither spoke.

Then he said quietly, "You could make this easy."

"I don't want easy," she said. "I want respect."

The words struck deeper than he cared to admit.

Something twisted in his chest — guilt, pride, anger, he couldn't tell. He turned away abruptly, his voice cold again. "Do as you wish. But when you destroy yourself with your pride, do not expect me to save you."

He started toward the door, then paused, looking back once more.

"You should learn to behave," he said quietly. "I am your husband. That alone deserves some respect."

Lian An's smile was faint, sharp, and heartbreakingly tired. "Then act like one."

He froze for a moment — then left.

The doors shut behind him with a hollow thud.

Outside, the Emperor walked through the moonlight, every step heavier than the last. His anger simmered, yet his heart refused to cool.

Why does she make me pity her? he thought bitterly. Why can't she just bend once?

By the time he reached his chambers, dawn had begun to tint the horizon.

Sleep would not come that night.

Inside the ancestral hall, the Empress picked up her brush again, eyes steady, and began a new line of scripture.

> The heart that kneels unwillingly still prays to its own truth.