

Interlude: The Emperor's Night Out

Marriage wasn't so bad, Celestial Emperor Tongzhi decided as he rolled off the body of his principal consort. It was true that Her Majesty Arute was not the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but she was kind and respectful to him, like his mother Zhen. She never criticized him, like his mother Lan, or made him feel bad. He had been excited to bed his new concubines, but after the novelty wore off, he found he enjoyed Arute's company best of all. The concubines were silly, boring girls, and they were stiff and awkward with him during bedding. One even cried. Arute never cried. She was a lady.

"I can't wait until my coronation," he said, staring up at the top of the bed curtains. "My tunic will have so much embroidery and gold thread I'll hardly be able to stand up in it." He grinned. "And you will wear the finest robe anyone has ever seen, and a headdress with jewels hanging down to your shoulders."

Arute smiled and touched his bare chest. "No one will spare a glance at me, Majesty. They will all be looking at you as you ascend the Dragon Throne. Everyone will be so thrilled to finally have an emperor after all this time." She shifted onto her side, and Tongzhi admired her small but perfectly shaped breasts. "Her Majesty Dowager Empress Lan has been a capable regent, especially considering the status of her family, but she has been keeping you from your rightful place for far too long."

He sighed. "I know, but what can I do? She controls everything, and she has spies everywhere." He glanced over at his personal eunuch, who waited patiently next to a steaming bowl of water to bathe him when he rose from the bed. "Isn't that right, Master Li?"

The eunuch bowed. “I don’t know of these things, Your Majesty. I only serve Your Majesty and Her Majesty the First Consort.”

The emperor snorted. “Horse manure. She probably pays you to spy on us. Or does she threaten you if you don’t?”

Li fell on his knees. “Please, Your Majesty, I am loyal only to you, but I do not wish to be considered an enemy of Her Majesty Dowager Empress Lan. Everyone knows what happens to her enemies.”

Arute rose from the bed and wrapped a loose robe around herself. “What happens to them, Master Li? I am new to the palace and ignorant of such matters.”

“Oh, Your Majesty, please don’t make me speak of such things.”

“Master Li, you will answer Her Majesty’s questions!”

Arute laid a hand on the emperor’s shoulder. “Majesty, do not frighten him. Forgive me, but your honorable mother bullies everyone—the servants, Her Majesty Zhen. Even you. You know it’s true. She keeps you from your rightful throne so she can cling to power. Master Li no doubt fears for his life if he speaks the truth. Isn’t that right, Master Li?”

The eunuch nodded, eyes on the floor.

“You cannot allow her to control you, my dearest Majesty. She is not emperor—she is hardly even of noble blood.” Arute wrinkled her nose. “She has stolen power, and it’s time for you to take it back.”

“I know how you feel about her because of what she did to your grandfather—”

“That’s in the past,” Arute interrupted. “My family will never forgive her, but I am to be your empress. Dowager Empress was a former concubine but I married the Dragon Emperor of the great Qing Dynasty, and he will rule our empire as his ancestors did. He will drive out the foreigners and restore our own culture, which has endured for thousands of years.” She settled next to him on the bed and gestured to the eunuch for the bowl of water and a towel. When he set them at her feet, she wetted the towel, wrung it out, and began gently bathing the emperor’s dragon stalk. “And he will not let a woman usurp his throne.”

When Tongzhi arrived at his private study to prepare for court, he was still buoyed by Arute’s words. Today he would pay close attention during the ministers’ long, boring reports. He would listen to every word of the edicts his mother dictated and stamped with his seal. And he would ask questions. It was his right. He was to be emperor, after all.

His mother Lan was waiting for him, and he greeted her respectfully. Even though she didn’t deserve it.

“My dear son, I am concerned that you will not be ready for your coronation.”

Not this again. “Honorable Mother, I have been studying every day with my tutors and making notes during court sessions—”

She gestured impatiently to silence him. “I see that you are making some efforts to prepare yourself to rule, but these, I fear, are canceled out by all the time you spend with Her Majesty Arute.”

A cold chill ran down his spine. He would have that eunuch killed. No, Arute wouldn't like it. He'd have him sent to the Imperial Hunting Lodge.

"You and Honorable Mother Zhen were the ones who insisted I take a wife," he protested. "And now you don't want me to spend time with her?"

"Of course you must spend time with her," Lan replied coldly. "But not all of your time. It's not appropriate behavior for an emperor."

"My honorable father spent quite a lot of time with you, I'm told."

"Show respect!" she hissed. "You are not your late father. He understood what it meant to rule. You can't see past your own dragon stalk."

He stared at her, incredulous.

"And that is why I think Her Majesty Arute should visit her family for a few months, until your coronation ceremony. It will allow you time to focus on everything you need to know to take your throne, and this will be her last opportunity to spend time with her family before she becomes empress. It's best for everyone. Now get ready for court." Lan rose without looking at him and followed Master Shi to her customary place behind the yellow silk curtain.

The palace was beginning to feel like a cage. Tongzhi could go nowhere without his mother finding out and interfering. *How am I supposed to rule when I can't even talk to my own people?* He was so furious that he snapped at Master Kao when the eunuch asked him a simple question.

Kao dropped to his knees and banged his head on the floor. "Your Majesty, my humblest apologies for offending you!"

Tongzhi sighed. “No offense has been given, Master Kao. It’s just so frustrating to be stuck here all the time. I can’t even see my wife! My mother still treats me like a little boy.” He glanced at the eunuch, still prostrate, speculating. Master Kao and Master An had known his mother since she was a concubine. “How can I show her that I’m a man and can make my own decisions?”

Kao lifted his head. “Your Majesty, Empress Dowager Lan has managed to take hold of tremendous and unprecedented power, and she has the support of all the ministers and generals. It’s best to be patient and follow her good example. If you can rule as she does, the empire will flourish. Meanwhile, Master An and I are here to support and guide you.”

An looked up from the scroll he was studying. “Yes, Your Majesty. Whatever you need.”

An idea began forming in the emperor’s mind, like steam above a teapot. “Can you support me by helping me get out of the palace for a little while?”

Kao looked horrified. “Your Majesty, it’s not possible. It isn’t safe!”

“Why not?” He lifted a finger. “No one outside the court has seen me since I was a little boy. I’ll wear the clothes of a nobleman, and no one will recognize me.” He lifted another finger. “Master Lee can accompany me, out of uniform. Isn’t he a kung fu master? I think he can protect me. One night out—that’s all I ask. I just want to see the capital from the street, not hidden in a sedan chair.” He paused. “I’ll give both of you and Master Lee two thousand taels each if you help me. One night.”

“Your Majesty, we could all lose our heads if we’re caught,” An said.

“So don’t get caught. I know you and Master Kao take bribes for favors all the time. And don’t worry—I won’t tell my mothers. But keep in mind that when I am emperor, I will need trusted advisors. You can either be those advisors, or you can refuse me now and see where that lands you.”

Kao shook his head sadly. “Master Lee will not like this idea.”

“He will also want to keep his position when I become emperor.” Suddenly bored with the conversation, Tongzhi turned his back on the eunuch to stare out the window. “Can he fly like General Wen? Is that story even true, that General Wen flew to a rooftop to stop an assassin from killing Honorable Father?”

“It is true, Your Majesty—I was there to see it. But General Lee is not blessed with the art of lightness,” An said, “although he is more than capable of protecting you.”

“Excellent. I want to go tonight. I’m sure you two devious eunuchs can think of a way.”

Kao pursed his lips. “We could leave through Her Majesty Lan’s private audience chamber, the one she uses to meet with the foreigners. There’s a hidden path that leads to a door that opens onto an alley. General Lee will be familiar with the guards’ rounds and can easily get around them. With Your Majesty’s permission, I’ll speak with General Lee immediately.”

Tongzhi waved a hand in the eunuch’s direction. “Go now. And explain to him that I intend to do this.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Both eunuchs bowed and scurried out of the room. They were like old women, Tongzhi thought, afraid of their own shadows.

Just as he was beginning to feel hungry and considering sending a servant for some refreshment, there was a knock at the door of his sitting room.

“Your Majesty?” It was Kao. “I have brought General Lee.”

“Excellent! Let’s hear your plan, General.”

The kung fu master entered and dropped to his knees, head bowed. “Your Majesty wishes to leave the palace?” he asked incredulously, eyes on the floor.

“Yes, I do. And get up. My neck hurts from looking down at you.”

General Lee rose to his feet. He was an impressive figure, his muscles evident even beneath his palace uniform. His stance was calm but alert, like that of a wild stag.

“Your Majesty, what Master Kao has suggested is unwise and unsafe. Surely anything Your Majesty could experience in the streets of the capital could be brought here to the palace. Women, entertainers—”

“I did not ask for your opinion, General,” Tongzhi spat. “What I want to experience is the capital itself. The one thing I cannot have brought to me here is freedom, the experience of walking the streets of my capital like any other man.” He glared at Lee, trying and failing—which was irritating—to make him flinch. “How can I rule my subjects when I know nothing about their lives?”

Lee’s tone was respectful but not cowed, and something in his eyes told Tongzhi he saw right through this weak excuse. “I understand and will obey, Your Majesty, but only if Your Majesty agrees to certain precautions.”

This insolent man dares to give me conditions! I should have him whipped! “General Lee, I do not require your permission to leave my own palace. I am not a prisoner.”

“Of course not, Your Majesty, but I have sworn an oath to keep you safe. That is the whole of my duty.” Lee bowed, but his tone and his posture did not change. “I can take you out of the palace, but only if we are both in disguise and a small contingent of armed guards, also disguised, follow at a discreet distance. And if Your Majesty cannot follow my instructions, I cannot guarantee Your Majesty’s safety.” He looked up as though waiting for the emperor to acquiesce.

Tongzhi nodded, impatient.

“Does Your Majesty have a specific destination in mind?”

“How could I? I haven’t been anywhere without a sedan chair and my imperial guards. I certainly don’t want to visit temples and monuments like some foreign tourist!”

“No, of course not, Your Majesty. We will start with the night market. I’ll instruct Master Kao as to your disguise and where and when to meet.” He bowed again, lower this time, and backed out with Master Kao.

“Fine. You are dismissed, General.” Tongzhi’s heart was pounding. His mother thought she could control him, punish him by taking away his wife and forcing him to sit through dull meetings. He would show her. “I am the emperor! I’ll do as I please!” he shouted to the empty chamber.

An hour after dark, the young emperor was dressed in a plain tunic of expensive fabric like a younger son of a noble. General Lee appeared silently at his door in the simple padded clothes of a farmer.

“You’re going to be hot in those heavy clothes,” Tongzhi observed.

“Very true, Your Majesty, but it’s the best way to hide my weapons.”

The emperor raised his eyebrows. “Weapons?”

“My sword, a few throwing knives. I want every weapon at my disposal to protect Your Majesty outside the palace.” Lee shook his head. “I still think this is a bad idea, Your Majesty, but I understand. You want to experience life the way your subjects do. It’s an honorable instinct.”

“Yes, and I’m also really bored.”

Lee nodded, expressionless. “Shall we go, Your Majesty? By the way, I shall call you Master Shen while we’re in public. Please do not be offended if I appear to treat you disrespectfully.”

“Understood, Master Lee. Just try not to slip.”

The door to his mother’s private chamber was unguarded, and General Lee led him quickly down a path that wound through a thicket of trees and a maze of stone walls. When the general halted and slid one of the stones aside, Tongzhi realized the wall contained a hidden door. It opened onto an empty, dirty alley. He breathed deeply. The night air smelled of smoke, cooking oil, and dung. And freedom. It was intoxicating.

“Where would you like to go first, Your Majesty? The night market?”

“Yes,” Tongzhi replied. “I want to see how things are bought and sold.”

“Very well. If Your Majesty will walk slightly in front of me, as if I’m your servant. I’ll tell you which way to go.”

Tongzhi glanced behind him. “Where are the guards you spoke of?”

“Your Majesty will only see them if Your Majesty is in grave danger. These men know their duty—I chose them carefully.”

The evening was clear and warm, and the streets were crowded. Tongzhi tried not to stare as they passed eating and drinking establishments where men and even some women gathered to relax and socialize. His stomach growled at the aroma of sizzling meat, peppers, and onions. He was tempted to order Lee to go in and buy him some food, but then they reached the night market. Dozens of merchants spread their wares across carts and tables and were calling out their specialties. The air was thick with their voices, and there were so many bodies! And they stank! Tongzhi had spent his entire life among clean, neatly dressed people who spoke quietly around him. *I should be disgusted*, he thought, and then wondered why he wasn’t.

He noticed several carts with what he recognized as western headgear and those funny timepieces they liked to wear. Men in fine dress clustered around these carts, but the peasants avoided them. *Well, they can’t afford such things*, he reasoned. But then he saw one man in rough garb spit at the feet of a merchant and hiss an insult at him.

“Master Lee, is that you? After all this time?”

Tongzhi turned quickly to see an older woman grab his bodyguard by the arm. Lee looked very uncomfortable.

“And who is your handsome young friend? I could eat him up!”

Embarrassed, Tongzhi stared at his feet. He hadn't imagined anyone would notice or speak to him.

“Aren't you going to introduce us?” the woman continued. When the emperor dared to look up, he saw that she was wearing cosmetics, a silk tunic, and gaudy hair ornaments. She met his gaze boldly, like a man.

Lee cleared his throat. “Hello, Little Spring. This is my—my nephew, Shen Ming. We call him Little Ming.”

A cascade of laughter. “Oh, Little Ming, it's nice to meet you! I'm Little Spring, but I'm not so little, and I think maybe you're not so little either, if you know what I mean.” Her gaze dropped to his groin and she winked.

Did she just—

Lee tried to move away, but Little Spring held onto his arm. “I don't think I've seen you since the fire! You must have thought I died!”

Lee's face turned red, and he nodded briefly.

“My ancestors must have been looking out for me that night!” Her face twisted into a bitter smile. “Two of my sisters and I took the evening off and went out to celebrate my birthday. And when we came back—oh, it was awful!” She wiped away a tear that Tongzhi couldn't see. “But we started up a new house. It wasn't easy at first, but once word got out, well—you know.” She winked again. “Every night my girls are busy until dawn!” Her eyes traveled across

Tongzhi's body. "But I think we could squeeze in your nephew, if he's interested. And you, of course—on the house, for old time's sake."

"No, no, but thanks, Little Spring. It was nice seeing you again, and that's great news about the business—" Lee gently removed the woman's hand from his arm and looked around nervously.

"Uncle Lee," Tongzhi said hesitantly. "Is Miss Little Spring inviting us to a party?"

Lee shook his head vigorously.

"Yes, Little Ming," Little Spring said gaily. "A wonderful party where you'll have the best time of your life!"

"That sounds really nice, Little Spring, but, uh, Little Ming's mother is expecting him. In fact, we're already late."

The marketplace and the food stalls were intriguing, but this was something else. "No, I think it's all right, uncle. Let's go to this party. We don't want to be rude to Miss Little Spring."

Little Spring released Lee and wrapped her arm around Tongzhi's elbow, resting her head on his shoulder. She smelled of some strong floral perfume that made the blood flow straight to his dragon stalk. "See what nice manners your nephew has! Let's go—my house is just outside the city gate. Oh, imagine running into you, Master Lee, after all these years. I've missed you!"

Tongzhi gave Lee a look that said, quite clearly, *We're doing this*. The look Lee returned indicated *This is a terrible idea*. Tongzhi mouthed slowly *I order it*. Lee shrugged and stepped to the side.

Little Spring led them to a small house with brightly colored lanterns hanging from the eaves. “It may not be as fancy as the Jade Flower House,” she said. “But the service is just as good, and all our clients leave very satisfied!”

Inside was a comfortable lounge where several men in fine clothes sipped mao tai. Some were accompanied by ladies dressed like Little Spring. Other ladies sat in groups on low benches, chatting. When they saw Lee and Tongzhi, they stopped talking and curved their painted lips into seductive smiles.

“Master Lee, I no longer service customers, but I’d be happy to make an exception for you. Unless you think I’m too old and ugly now?” She grinned. “As for your nephew—”

“Little Spring, that’s very kind of you to offer, and maybe some other time . . . but tonight I think we’ll just have a drink and then head home.”

No. No way. “Uncle Lee, I wouldn’t mind spending some time here. These beautiful ladies look like they could use some company.”

“You’re right about that, young man.” Tongzhi’s entire body jerked as Little Spring gave his dragon stalk a gentle squeeze. “I see someone is ready to play.”

Lee widened his eyes at the emperor and shook his head. Tongzhi glared.

“The thing is, Little Spring, my sister married into a noble family, and she’s very concerned about my nephew’s reputation. She wouldn’t like it if anyone were to see him here and gossip.”

Tongzhi glared again and mouthed *I’m doing this.*

“So, uh, how about if I give you three hundred taels to shut the place down for the night and only service him? I’ll wait down here.”

Little Spring’s painted eyebrows shot up. “Three hundred taels?” She pretended to consider, then raised her voice so all could hear. “Gentlemen, I’m so sorry, but we’re closed for the evening for a private party. Please come back tomorrow—we’ll give you a special discount for your trouble, and your drinks are free tonight.” The men grumbled but made their way out the door. One of the ladies locked it behind the last of them.

“Anyone upstairs?” Lee asked.

“Not yet,” Little Spring. “We’ve just opened. Would you like to see? I can help you check all the beds.”

“No, no—thank you.”

She pouted. “You really must think I’m over the hill.”

“It’s not that, it’s just.” Lee lowered his voice. “I’d like to come back some other night, but tonight maybe just give my nephew a good time.”

“Oh, for three hundred taels, we’ll give him more than a good time.” She draped herself over Tongzhi’s shoulder again and whispered in his ear. “Since we’re closed, all these lovely ladies have nothing to do. Maybe you could oblige them by playing a game we call Three Hungry Tigers Feasting on Crouching Dragon.”

Tongzhi’s eyes widened. He held up three fingers. “Three lady tigers?”

“Oh, yes, and they’re simply famished! Which ones do you like best, Little Ming?”

Five ladies gathered around him, cooing and stroking his arms. How could he possibly choose?

Little Spring glanced down at his dragon stalk, which was making a lump under his tunic. “My, but that’s a big dragon! I’d say it could feed all five. What do you think, ladies?”

“I think one lady is enough,” Lee said, looking alarmed.

“You don’t think I can handle five, uncle? Because I assure you I can.”

Lee sat down, shaking his head.

“Let me get you a bottle of mao tai,” cooed Little Spring, “while your nephew enjoys his party upstairs. We can catch up. How is that friend of yours, Master Wen? He was so good-looking! Not as handsome as you, of course.”

It was nearly dawn before Tongzhi stumbled down the stairs to find Lee seated on a bench alone.

“Little Spring didn’t lie. This has been the best night of my entire life.” His face was stretched into what felt like a permanent grin. He slapped Lee on the back. “I don’t know how these ladies do what they do—I’ve never spilled my seed so many times in one night.”

Lee unlocked the door and ushered him out into the empty street. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, *Master Shen*, but this was a huge risk, and one we can’t take again.”

“On the contrary, *uncle*, we’ll be coming back the night after tomorrow. I’ve already arranged it with Little Spring. Same price.”

Lee shook his head, looking bewildered. “Your Majesty, these are common prostitutes. How can they possibly please Your Majesty more than your imperial concubines?”

Tongzhi laughed out loud, startling a stray dog in the street. “I don’t know! How *do* they do it?”