

## Ghost 157

Chapter 157: a meal overdue

The message arrived just before noon.

The Empress was still in her courtyard, the sun warming the stone tiles, when her maid hurried in, breath light but expression careful.

"Your Majesty," she said softly, bowing. "A message from His Majesty."

The Empress paused mid-motion, fingers still stroking the cat curled in her lap.

"...Read it."

The maid unfolded the small slip of paper. "His Majesty says he will be eating lunch in Your Majesty's courtyard today. He requests that the food be prepared by you."

For a brief moment, the courtyard fell utterly silent.

The Empress stared at the cat.

Then she sighed.

"So," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else, "the promise begins."

The cat blinked up at her lazily, unimpressed.

The maid hesitated. "Shall I inform the kitchen staff—"

"No," the Empress interrupted. "I'll do it myself."

The maid bowed, relief flickering across her face. "Yes, Your Majesty."

As soon as she left, three familiar figures drifted into view.

Fen Yu floated upside down above the roof beam, arms crossed. "Ohhh, lunch together. How romantic."

Wei Rong snorted. "He's testing her."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves calmly. "Or reminding her who holds the leverage."

The Empress stood, brushing imaginary dust from her robes. "Either way, I'm cooking."

Fen Yu drifted closer, peering at her face. "Are you nervous?"

"No," the Empress said flatly.

Fen Yu grinned. "You're nervous."

"I'm annoyed," the Empress corrected. "There's a difference."

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In the Kitchen

The palace kitchen was unusually quiet.

Word had already spread—His Majesty was coming to the Empress's courtyard.

No one dared linger.

The Empress tied her sleeves back, movements practiced and steady. She chose simple dishes, but thoughtful ones.

Clear chicken soup, slow-simmered. Steamed fish with ginger and scallions. Seasonal vegetables, lightly stir-fried. Soft rice, fragrant and warm.

Not extravagant. Not cold.

Balanced.

As she worked, memories surfaced uninvited.

Him standing in the garden, sleeves rolled up, dirt on his hands. Him laughing when she pinched his neck. Him saying, Remember to send three meals a day.

"Tch," she muttered, slicing ginger a little too sharply.

Fen Yu leaned against a cabinet. "You know... if he didn't like you, he wouldn't come."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "He also wouldn't threaten exile."

Li Shen nodded thoughtfully. "Both can be true."

The Empress didn't respond. She focused on the rhythm of cooking—the familiar comfort of control.

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His Arrival

By the time the food was ready, the courtyard had been arranged.

A low table. Two cushions. Fresh tea.

The Emperor arrived without ceremony.

No grand announcement. No procession.

Just him, stepping through the gate in plain robes, expression calm but eyes sharp.

The Empress stood.

"Your Majesty."

"Sit," he said lightly. "I'm here to eat, not be worshipped."

She obeyed, placing the dishes carefully between them.

He looked at the spread, surprised—just for a second.

"You remembered I don't like heavy food at noon."

She glanced at him. "I remember many things."

He studied her face as he picked up his chopsticks. "You look... well."

"Miracles happen," she replied dryly.

He smiled faintly and began to eat.

The first spoonful of soup made him pause.

"...It's good."

She didn't respond.

He ate quietly, properly, without rush. Not like an emperor reviewing a meal—but like a man eating with someone familiar.

For a few moments, neither spoke.

The cats crept closer, bold as ever.

He glanced down. "They've grown."

"They were fed," she said. "Regularly."

Another pause.

"You didn't have to keep your word," he said suddenly. "About cooking."

She met his gaze. "I did."

His eyes softened—just slightly.

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Between Words

After a while, he set his chopsticks down.

"The healer will come again tomorrow," he said. "Formality. The court needs closure."

"I know."

"And after that..." he continued, "...you'll return fully to your duties."

She nodded.

Silence stretched again—but this time, it wasn't uncomfortable.

Fen Yu whispered loudly, "This is painfully domestic."

Wei Rong sighed. "I hate that I agree."

Li Shen smiled.

The Emperor glanced at the last untouched dish and pushed it toward her. "Eat."

She raised a brow. "You came to eat."

"And I came hungry," he said. "But not alone."

She hesitated—then took a bite.

For the first time in a long while, they ate the same meal, under the same sun, without masks or titles pressing between them.

He looked at her again.

"...Lunch tomorrow too," he said.

She exhaled slowly. "We'll see."

He smiled, clearly taking that as a yes.

Above them, unseen by all but her, three ghosts exchanged looks.

Fen Yu grinned. "Oh. This is getting interesting."

And the Empress, despite herself, felt the faintest sense that something—quietly, stubbornly—was changing.

Next Chapter — Whispers After Midnight

Night settled gently over the palace, the kind of night where secrets felt heavier than the air itself.

The Empress had just finished her evening meal when a sudden thud echoed near the window.

She didn't even look up.

"Fen Yu," she said calmly, "if you break another vase, you're cleaning it."

A pale head slowly peeked out from behind the curtain.

"...How did you know it was me?"

Wei Rong materialized beside the pillar, arms crossed. "Because Li Shen and I don't knock things over like children."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, expression unusually alert. "More importantly—what we heard is far more interesting than broken pottery."

That finally caught the Empress's attention.

She set her tea down. "What did you hear?"

Fen Yu floated forward, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Gossip. Very good gossip."

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The Gossip

"The Dowager Empress's courtyard," Fen Yu began dramatically. "We went there because someone was crying again. We thought it was another prayer session."

Wei Rong snorted. "It was not."

Li Shen continued evenly, "There were servants whispering. Nervous ones. The kind that glance over their shoulders every few breaths."

Fen Yu clapped her hands. "Turns out, Her Highness isn't praying at night anymore."

The Empress frowned slightly. "Then what is she doing?"

Fen Yu leaned close, whispering loudly, "She's meeting an old minister."

Silence.

"...Meeting?" the Empress repeated.

Li Shen nodded. "Privately. Repeatedly."

Wei Rong added bluntly, "In the inner pavilion. After midnight."

Fen Yu giggled. "And not for tea."

The Empress slowly leaned back.

"Which minister?"

Li Shen replied, "Minister Han of the Eastern Granary."

The Empress's eyes darkened. "The one who's nearly seventy?"

"The very one," Fen Yu said cheerfully. "Wrinkled, slow, and married three times."

Wei Rong grimaced. "Disgusting."

Fen Yu waved her hand. "Don't judge. Love knows no age."

Wei Rong shot her a glare. "This isn't love. This is rot."

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## Chaos Begins

The Empress pinched the bridge of her nose. "You're certain?"

Li Shen inclined his head. "They meet disguised. The Dowager wears plain robes. The minister uses the servant passage."

Fen Yu added, "And yesterday, they even went outside the palace."

The Empress looked up sharply. "Outside?"

"Yes!" Fen Yu said. "They went to a secluded teahouse. Sat very close. The Dowager laughed."

Wei Rong scoffed. "The same woman who lectures morality every morning."

The Empress let out a slow breath.

"So that's why she's been unusually quiet."

Fen Yu bounced mid-air. "Should we expose them? I can knock over a lantern, reveal their faces, maybe scream—"

"No," the Empress said immediately.

All three ghosts froze.

She looked at them steadily. "Not yet."

Fen Yu pouted. "But chaos is my specialty."

"I know," the Empress replied. "Which is exactly why I'm saying no."

Li Shen studied her. "You're thinking strategically."

"Yes," she said. "If this comes out carelessly, it will backfire. The Dowager has power. Deep roots."

Wei Rong cracked his knuckles. "But if the Emperor finds out—"

The Empress cut him off. "He doesn't need to. Not yet."

Fen Yu blinked. "Then why are you smiling like that?"

The Empress's lips curved faintly.

"Because now I understand many things," she said softly.

"Why certain ministers were protected. Why false treasury cases were buried. Why Lady Chen was encouraged."

Li Shen's eyes sharpened. "Leverage."

"Exactly."

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A Dangerous Secret

Fen Yu drifted in a slow circle. "So... we spy?"

"Yes."

Wei Rong nodded approvingly. "I like this plan."

Li Shen added, "Carefully. Evidence first."

Fen Yu saluted dramatically. "Leave it to me! I'll follow them on their next... date."

The Empress pointed a finger at her. "No flirting."

Fen Yu gasped. "I am offended."

"And no breaking anything," the Empress added.

Fen Yu sighed. "You take all the fun out of villainy."

As the ghosts faded back into the shadows, whispering excitedly among themselves, the Empress remained seated, eyes thoughtful.

So the Dowager preaches virtue by day... and sneaks into shadows by night.

She picked up her teacup, expression calm but dangerous.

If the palace is a game of masks, she thought,

then perhaps it's time the most righteous mask cracks first.

Outside, the moon slipped behind a cloud.

And somewhere in the palace, secrets continued to rot quietly—

unaware that they had already been seen.