

## Ghost 57

Chapter 57: shattered pride

The morning light in Lady Chen's chamber was blinding — a cruel, unforgiving brightness that crept through the latticed windows, prying into every shadow. It was the kind of light that revealed everything a person wanted hidden.

The air reeked faintly of sandalwood and spilled tea, and the silence was broken only by the sound of servants carefully sweeping the shards of porcelain from last night's rage.

They froze when the doors burst open with a violent crack.

Lord Chen Guiren stormed in, his heavy steps rattling the floorboards, his fury palpable like heat from a forge. His beard was uncombed, his silk robes hastily thrown over his shoulders, the golden embroidery darkened by sweat and anger.

The attendants immediately dropped to their knees, foreheads pressed against the cold tiles. None dared to breathe too loud.

Lady Chen rose from her seat near the window, startled, her fingers tightening around her handkerchief. "Father, you shouldn't—"

She didn't finish.

The next sound was porcelain shattering against stone.

The teacup her father had hurled missed her face by a hair's breadth, smashing against the pillar behind her. Tea splattered down the carved wood like a trail of blood, pooling at her feet.

"You useless girl!" Lord Chen's voice thundered through the chamber, raw with rage and humiliation. "Do you have any idea what disgrace your uncle has brought upon this house? Do you know what the Emperor has done to our name?!"

Lady Chen's heart raced. Her throat felt tight, her voice trembling but defiant. "Father, I didn't know about Uncle's dealings. His Majesty said he—"

"His Majesty?"

Lord Chen let out a cruel, humorless laugh. "Do not speak his title as though you still hold any power over him. If you had done your duty as a wife—if you had controlled him—he would not have dared to turn his sword upon us!"

Lady Chen's composure cracked. "You think I can control him? He—he is not the same man he was before—"

"You can't even control that bitch of an Empress!" her father spat, slamming his hand down on the table so hard that the inkstone jumped. "You let her crawl out of her family's ruin and dazzle him with her false purity! You let her twist the Emperor's pity against you and turn his wrath upon us!"

His words cut deeper than the shards of porcelain on the floor. Lady Chen's lips trembled, but her tears burned instead of fell. "Father, I tried! I've given him everything — my youth, my devotion, my heart—"

"Your excuses!" he bellowed. "While you whimper, your uncle's head will roll at dawn. Your cousins are being dragged through the streets like animals, their wives sold to the border, and you stand here weeping?!"

He stepped closer, his shadow falling across her face. "If you cannot fix this, then I will send your younger sister to the palace. Perhaps she will succeed where you have failed."

The words hit like a slap.

Lady Chen stumbled back a step, her voice barely above a whisper. "You... you would replace me?"

Her father's eyes were sharp as blades. "I will do whatever is necessary to protect our name. You have one chance left, Qing'er. Fix it. Or I will find someone who can."

He turned sharply, his robes swirling around him like a dark storm. His footsteps echoed down the marble corridor, each one fainter and fainter until the silence became unbearable.

When the doors shut behind him, the room seemed to collapse inward — heavy, suffocating, still.

Lady Chen stood frozen, her entire body trembling. Then slowly, something inside her snapped.

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A Chamber of Ruin

Her scream ripped through the air — wild, furious, animal.

With one sweep of her arm, she sent the vanity crashing to the floor.

Perfume bottles shattered. Red lacquer boxes burst open. Strings of pearls and jade scattered across the tiles like tears.

"Replace me?" she hissed, grabbing the edge of the broken table, knuckles whitening. "Send her into my palace? Never!"

Her eyes burned, her voice hoarse with rage. "Since she came — since that woman entered the palace — everything has turned against me!"

She kicked over the stool, the sound of wood cracking echoing through the chamber. Her hair fell loose from its golden pins, tumbling around her face like a dark storm cloud. "Before her, His Majesty looked only at me. He promised me the stars, promised me a child — our child. And now..."

Her voice broke. "Now he laughs at her."

Lady Chen sank to her knees amid the mess, gasping, her tears hot and unchecked. Her reflection shimmered in a broken piece of bronze mirror, fractured into cruel angles. She lifted her trembling hand to her cheek — she could still feel the ghost of the Empress's slap from days before, the humiliation branded on her skin.

"I will not lose," she whispered, her voice low and trembling with venom. "I will not fade into her shadow."

Her gaze drifted toward the far corner of the chamber — the red-lacquered chest sealed with wax, hidden beneath embroidered cloth. She crawled toward it, her silks dragging across broken porcelain that cut shallow lines across her knees.

Her fingers broke the wax seal with a sharp crack. Inside lay a small porcelain vial, slender and elegant, carved with the shape of blooming orchids. The liquid inside shimmered faintly pink, glowing in the morning light like stolen rose petals.

The Conceiving Elixir.

Forbidden. Dangerous. Unnatural.

A potion whispered about only in the deepest corners of the apothecary guild — said to awaken a woman's womb and bind her fate to the man whose seed it carried.

Lady Chen cradled it in her hand, her lips curving into a tremor of a smile. "If I bear him a son," she murmured, "no one can touch me. Not that woman. Not my father. Not even Heaven itself."

Her voice gained strength with each word. "A son is the Emperor's blood — his legacy, his weakness, his shield. Once I carry it, he cannot discard me."

She wiped her face roughly with her sleeve, smearing tears and powder alike. Her reflection stared back from the bronze mirror — hair wild, eyes red and fever-bright, lips curved in a terrible smile.

"I will take back everything that was mine," she said softly, almost serenely now. "His love. His throne. My family's honor. All of it."

She lifted the vial, watching the light dance across its surface, and whispered the Empress's name as though it were poison.

"Lian An."

The name left her lips like a curse, trembling with hatred.

"You stole my peace, my pride, my place... but soon, I'll take something from you that you can never get back."

Her laughter began as a soft, broken sound — the sound of someone unraveling — but it grew louder, richer, echoing down the corridor until even the maids outside dared not move.

Outside, thunder grumbled across the horizon, faint but ominous, as if the heavens themselves recoiled from what was to come.

Inside, Lady Chen held the vial to her chest, her laughter turning to a whisper:

"Soon. The palace will remember my name."