

Ghost 66

Chapter 66: the poison of desire

The Chen residence was silent, but Lady Chen's heart wasn't.

The night stretched long and heavy, moonlight spilling like pale silk through the lattice windows. From the distance came faint temple bells and the lonely cry of a night bird. Inside her chamber, every shadow seemed to whisper.

Lady Chen sat alone at her dressing table, her face reflected in the polished bronze mirror — pale, beautiful, and weary. Her eyes were ringed faintly in red, though she'd powdered them carefully. Her hair fell in perfect coils, her robes of crimson gauze rustled softly as she breathed.

But her composure was paper-thin.

It had been only two days since her father's visit — since he'd shattered her tea cup and her pride with equal cruelty.

> "You are useless," he'd said.

"If you cannot control the Emperor, I will send your younger sister to replace you."

The words still burned in her ears.

Her sister — that sweet, gentle child everyone praised for her kindness, her obedience, her supposed filial heart — the same sister whose letter had arrived that morning, full of apology and gifts.

A letter written in soft, flowing script:

> "Elder Sister, I found a medicine said to strengthen a woman's body and bless her with life. Please use it when the time feels right. I pray Heaven grants you a child soon."

Along with the letter came a small porcelain vial — pale pink, sealed with gold wax.

Lady Chen had stared at it for a long time before breaking the seal.

The faint scent that drifted out was sweet — too sweet — like crushed peony mixed with something thicker, darker.

A conceiving potion.

Rare, expensive, and whispered about in scandal.

It was said to "strengthen the womb" — but its real power was far more unpredictable.

Sometimes it worked miraculously.

Sometimes... it burned from within.

Still, the vial shimmered in her hand like hope.

Shadows of Envy

The lamp flickered as she leaned forward, her reflection multiplying in the bronze.

She saw herself — and behind that, the ghost of everything she'd lost.

The Emperor's laughter that no longer belonged to her.

The way his eyes softened when speaking to that quiet, infuriating Empress — the woman who never tried, yet always seemed to win.

Even Dowager Empress had started favoring her, praising her for her "steady virtue."

Virtue.

Lady Chen nearly spat the word aloud.

Virtue did not keep a man warm.

Virtue did not secure a crown.

She gripped the edge of the vanity, her knuckles whitening.

She could still hear her father's voice from that day:

> "You let her crawl out of ruin and steal your place. You were born to rule, yet she sits at the Emperor's side while you wait for crumbs."

Tears stung her eyes, but they were not of sorrow — they were rage.

No. She would not lose.

She could not.

And as fate would have it, her sister had handed her the very key to survival.

The Two Vials

Her hand trembled slightly as she opened the lacquered chest hidden beneath her dressing table.

Inside lay another vial — black glass, sealed with silver wax.

She had kept it for months.

A secret even from her maids.

The apothecary who sold it to her had whispered in a trembling voice:

> "It's not poison, my lady. Merely... persuasion. A draught that softens resistance and stirs the blood."

A seduction potion — made from crimson poppy and moonflower essence.

Forbidden by imperial law.

But powerful.

She had planned to use it long ago — when things had been colder between her and the Emperor — but fear had stayed her hand.

Now fear was gone.

Only desperation remained.

She lifted both vials into the moonlight.

One pink — life.

One black — desire.

Her lips curved faintly. "How poetic."

The black one shimmered when tilted, catching the candlelight like ink. The pink one glowed softly, almost innocent.

She placed them side by side on her vanity, their reflections like twin serpents coiled around her fate.

The Calculation of a Woman Cornered

If she succeeded...

If the potion worked...

If she conceived...

Then no one — not the Empress, not the Dowager, not even Heaven — could strip her of her place.

An heir.

That was all she needed.

She whispered to her reflection, "A child changes everything."

And it was true.

The Empress might have grace.

She might have favor.

But a womb without a child was a fragile crown.

Lady Chen had already prepared everything in her mind:

The perfect night.

The perfect opportunity.

The perfect illusion.

The Emperor had not visited her chambers in weeks. He was buried in matters of the border, restless, wary, but not heartless.

She knew how to reach him — gently, tearfully, through pity first, then comfort, then closeness.

He had always been weak to her tears.

Once he held her like she was the only peace he knew.

She could bring that man back.

A Sister's Blessing, A Serpent's Bite

A soft knock came at her door.

"Come in," she said, swiftly hiding the black vial and leaving the pink one on display.

Her maid entered, bowing. "My lady, a courier arrived from your family. A message from the young mistress Chen Mei."

Lady Chen's lashes fluttered. "What does it say?"

"She... prays for your health and hopes the medicine strengthens you, my lady. She said she'll be sent to the palace soon."

A faint smile touched Lady Chen's lips. "So, the little bird is finally leaving the nest."

The maid hesitated. "Shall I send her thanks?"

"No."

Her tone was soft, but final. "I'll write myself later."

When the maid left, Lady Chen let out a low, humorless laugh.

Her sister's kindness — though genuine — burned like salt in a wound.

She had meant it with pure intent, but purity was a luxury Lady Chen no longer had.

She picked up the vial again and turned it in her fingers.

"You think this will help me conceive?" she murmured. "Perhaps it will. Perhaps it will do much more."

She set it down beside the hidden black vial and whispered, "Together, you'll win me my crown."

The Night's Reflection

Outside, the wind stirred the garden lanterns.

Inside, Lady Chen rose from her chair and walked to the window.

The moon hung low, full and golden, heavy like the fate she carried.

From this high wing, she could see the palace roofs in the distance — faint outlines against the night sky.

Somewhere behind those walls, the Emperor was likely still awake, reading reports, his brow furrowed.

And perhaps... thinking of someone else.

Her nails dug into her palm.

She remembered how he used to look at her — how he used to laugh.

The warmth, the teasing, the way he'd call her by her childhood name when they were alone.

All of it — gone, slipping from her fingers like silk into a fire.

"No," she whispered. "Not yet. You were mine before she came. You will be mine again."

Her reflection in the window glass stared back at her — pale, beautiful, and frighteningly resolute.

She touched her abdomen lightly. "And when I give you a son... even Heaven won't be able to take you from me."

A Dangerous Calm

The rest of the night passed in ritualistic stillness.

Lady Chen dismissed her attendants early. She prepared her own tea, infused with crushed ginseng and a single drop of the conceiving potion.

The sweetness coated her tongue, faintly floral — almost pleasant.

A strange warmth spread through her body, gentle and slow.

Then, from the drawer, she drew out the black vial.

She uncorked it and took a single breath.

The air filled with a perfume that was almost intoxicating — like the mix of amber and honey, dangerous and cloying.

She smiled, eyes heavy with anticipation.

It was almost time.

The Emperor had promised to visit the main courtyard tomorrow evening — to discuss matters of ceremony. It would be her only chance in months.

She would prepare the wine herself.

She would laugh softly, speak gently, pour the cup with trembling hands.

And once he drank...

Everything would change.

The Morning After Resolve

When dawn finally arrived, it was soft and golden.

Birds chirped, servants stirred, and the Chen residence woke to the scent of sandalwood and new beginnings.

Lady Chen stood before her mirror once again, dressed in pale blue — serene, composed, perfect.

But in her reflection, her eyes gleamed with something sharper than hope.

Determination.

And beneath it — madness.

She whispered to herself, as she pinned a hair ornament in place:

> "They think me broken. They think me powerless. But I am not finished.

The Empress may have her ghosts...

But I have my poisons."

Her smile was slow, beautiful, and terrifying.

Outside, the wind carried the first call of morning prayer.

Inside, the woman who once wept in despair now waited for night — and for destiny to drink from her hand.