

Ghost 67

Chapter 67: remembering past

The morning sun shimmered through the lattice windows of the Chen Palace, glinting on the rows of porcelain vases and the silken drapes that swayed faintly in the breeze. Yet beneath the bright light, the air was heavy — too still, too silent, as though even the walls dared not disturb their mistress's mood.

Lady Chen sat before her mirror, the soft scratch of her brush the only sound in the room. She painted her brows carefully — not too sharp, not too soft — the look of a woman who still wished to appear composed even when her heart felt like splintered glass.

Her maid Qing Lan stood quietly nearby, holding a folded silk handkerchief and several boxes wrapped in gold thread.

"My lady," she said softly, "the gifts are ready for delivery."

Lady Chen put down her brush and glanced at the boxes.

Inside them lay carefully chosen memories — things meant not to impress, but to remind.

The first: a small jade fan, once gifted by the Emperor when they were still young and in love. She had kept it even after it cracked; now it had been repaired with gold lacquer, gleaming brighter than before.

The second: a copy of a poem written in his own hand, framed with new silk backing.

And the third: a sachet, filled with the faint scent of sandalwood and camellia — the fragrance she used to wear during their early days together.

Each item was chosen not for beauty, but for memory.

"Make sure these reach His Majesty's study," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "No names, no words. He will know who sent them."

Qing Lan bowed deeply. "Yes, my lady."

As the maid turned to leave, Lady Chen added, "Send a messenger to my family's estate. Deliver a letter to my sister."

A Letter to Her Sister

When the chamber was empty again, Lady Chen sat by her desk and unrolled a new sheet of paper. Her brush moved slowly — graceful strokes hiding weary thoughts.

> "Dearest Mei'er,

Your letter reached me, and your gift has touched my heart more than words can express. The medicine you sent — I have received it safely. You are thoughtful beyond your years, and your kindness gives me strength.

The palace, however, is not a place for soft hearts. It devours innocence and rewards only silence. When you come here, remember this: do not speak too freely, do not trust too deeply. Even love can turn to poison under these roofs.

Still, I am proud of you.

Your elder sister,

Chen Ying."

When she sealed the letter, her hand trembled. For a brief moment, her expression softened — almost sisterly — before the mask of composure slid back into place.

"Mei'er," she whispered, "you deserve peace... not this."

She handed the letter to Qing Lan when the maid returned. "Make sure it leaves before noon."

"Yes, my lady."

The Emperor's Study

At that same hour, the Emperor sat in his private study within the Vermilion Palace, his desk covered in memorials from the border. His expression was drawn — eyes shadowed, fingers pressed to his temple.

He had not slept properly in days.

The news from the Duke's front was improving, but the tension in the capital had yet to ease.

"Your Majesty," Grand Eunuch Gao said softly, "a chest has arrived for you. From the Chen Palace. It bears no signature."

The Emperor's hand froze.

"Open it," he said quietly.

The eunuch obeyed, revealing the fan, the poem, and the sachet. The Emperor stared at them for a long moment. Then his fingers brushed the fan — smooth jade repaired with veins of gold.

He remembered the day he had given it to her.

It had been spring — the first year of their marriage. They had gone to the lakeside disguised as commoners. She had laughed then — carefree, unburdened — chasing peach petals that drifted down from the trees.

He'd bought her that fan to tease her, saying she could use it to catch the blossoms before they fell.

That memory hit him like a forgotten fragrance.

He had neglected her since the chaos at court.

She had lost her uncle, her family's honor, and still she had gone to him that night — tearful, saying he could take whatever steps he needed. "I am with you, no matter what," she had said.

He exhaled slowly, setting the fan down. "Prepare the imperial carriage," he said. "I will have lunch in the Chen Palace today."

Grand Eunuch Gao's eyes widened slightly, but he bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Lady Chen's Despair

In her chambers, Lady Chen sat staring blankly at the jade hairpin in her hand. Her father's words still echoed like venom through her mind:

> "If you cannot hold the Emperor's heart, I will send your sister to replace you."

She had spent the morning trying to compose herself, but the ache inside her refused to quiet.

Every smile, every graceful motion felt like armor she could no longer carry.

When the maid burst into the room breathless, Lady Chen barely turned.

"My lady!" Qing Lan gasped. "His Majesty — he is coming here!"

Her breath caught. "What?"

"He said he wishes to have lunch with you."

Lady Chen's chest tightened painfully.

For a moment, she thought she had misheard.

The Emperor... was coming?

The thought flooded her with sudden, wild relief — followed immediately by panic. Her face was pale, her hands trembling.

She rose quickly. "Prepare the chamber. Bring wine, fruit, and the peony dishes he likes. And — and light the sandalwood."

"Yes, my lady!"

The room turned into a whirl of motion as servants rushed to prepare. Lady Chen stood at the center, dazed, hardly believing the chance that had fallen into her lap.

Then — faintly, she heard footsteps.

She turned just as the door slid open.

The Emperor Arrives

The Emperor stepped in quietly, dressed in plain robes of deep blue. He dismissed the attendants with a single nod.

"Your Majesty," she whispered, lowering her head deeply. "I—"

Before she could finish, her voice broke, tears rising unbidden. The dam she had built inside her cracked. All the exhaustion, the humiliation, the loneliness — it surged at once.

When she raised her head, her eyes glimmered. "Your Majesty..."

Without thought, she stepped forward — and wrapped her arms around him.

The Emperor froze for half a breath.

Then, slowly, he returned the embrace, his palm resting lightly on her shoulder.

She wept silently against his chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know I shouldn't... I just— I missed you."

His brows softened. "Lady Chen..."

"I'm not crying for my uncle," she said between breaths, her voice trembling. "I know he deserved what he got. I just... I feel so lost lately. Everything feels so cold."

He sighed, brushing a tear from her cheek with his thumb.

"It's not your fault," he said quietly. "None of this is. Your uncle chose his path. I never blamed you."

Her lips quivered, but she forced a small smile. "Then... why does it feel like you did?"

He hesitated. "Because I forgot what mattered."

Their eyes met — just for a heartbeat — and for the first time in months, the distance between them didn't feel so endless.

Lunch in the Garden Pavilion

They sat together in the pavilion overlooking the koi pond. Servants brought dishes in silence — lotus root soup, glazed duck, steamed buns with red bean. The Emperor ate little; his gaze lingered on her more than the food.

Lady Chen spoke softly, choosing her words with care.

"Do you remember, Your Majesty, the first time we dined like this? You were still the crown prince. We snuck out to the city dressed as commoners."

He smiled faintly. "And you complained the entire time because the rice was too plain."

"I was spoiled," she said with a soft laugh. "But I liked seeing you laugh that day. You looked... free."

A silence stretched between them, gentle this time.

Then, gathering her courage, she said quietly, "Why don't we do it again?"

He blinked. "Do what again?"

"Go to the city," she said. "Just once. Like before. You and I — as ordinary people. No guards, no palace, no rules."

He studied her face for a long moment — the hopeful curve of her smile, the faint shimmer in her eyes. It was reckless, foolish, almost childlike — and somehow, it stirred something in him he thought long dead.

"Perhaps," he said finally, his voice low. "Once things calm."

Her smile deepened — gentle, sweet, triumphant. "Then I'll wait."

A Brief Return of Spring

When the meal ended, he rose. "I must return to court."

She stood quickly. "Of course. Thank you... for coming."

He hesitated, then reached out — a fleeting, almost tender gesture — brushing a stray lock of hair from her cheek.

"Take care of yourself, Ying'er."

She lowered her gaze. "Always, Your Majesty."

He turned and left, the faint rustle of his robes fading down the corridor.

When he was gone, Lady Chen remained by the table, staring at the empty teacup he had held. Her tears had dried, but the smile on her lips was strange — soft, brittle, almost dangerous.

She whispered to herself,

> "You came back once, you will again. I only need to wait."

Her hand brushed against the edge of her sleeve — where, hidden beneath the silk, the two vials rested, waiting for the night she would need them.