

## **Ghost 77**

### Chapter 77: return to the palace

The morning sun rose golden over the Duke's estate, warm light spilling through the veranda and glinting off the lacquered carriages lined before the gate.

Lian An stood with her mother and sister in the courtyard, her travel cloak wrapped loosely around her shoulders. Her eyes drifted toward the blooming plum trees—white petals falling like snow. It felt too soon to leave.

The Duchess clasped her hands gently. "You've grown thinner in the palace, my child. Don't forget to eat properly. Take this pouch—it has some herbs and calming tea."

"Thank you, Mother." Lian An smiled softly. "Your tea is better medicine than the palace physician's."

Her father, the Duke, stepped forward next, his usually stern face softened by pride. "The Emperor sent his men early. You'll have escort until the city gates. Don't worry about anything here—we'll handle the estate."

Lian Hua sniffed loudly, clutching her sister's sleeve. "Write to us! Or better—sneak out again next festival!"

Lian An laughed, brushing a tear from her cheek. "If I did that, the Emperor might send half his army after me."

Her cousin, Lian Ruo, stood slightly apart, arms folded, a teasing smirk hiding something warmer. "Take care, Cousin. The palace isn't kind to those who speak their minds too freely."

"I know," she said, meeting his gaze with a mischievous smile. "Which is why I have to speak twice as freely."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Still the same troublemaker."

The moment stretched bittersweet—the air thick with unsaid goodbyes, laughter, and the quiet ache of parting.

When the drums at the gate sounded, signaling the departure, Lian An turned to bow deeply to her parents. "Take care of your health. I'll visit soon."

"Go well, my daughter," said the Duchess softly.

The carriage rolled out through the gates, wheels crunching over the gravel path, and the Duke's family watched until it disappeared beyond the plum blossoms.

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The Journey Back

The road to the capital shimmered beneath the spring sun. Farmers bowed as the royal escort passed, children waved from the fields, and the wind smelled faintly of earth and blossoms.

Inside the carriage, Lian An leaned against the cushioned wall, feeling the gentle sway lull her into half-sleep. For a brief moment, peace.

Then came a loud crunch.

"Your Majesty," whispered a familiar, ghostly voice, far too close to her ear.

She sighed without opening her eyes. "Don't tell me you're eating inside the carriage."

Fen Yu's voice chimed, guilty and gleeful. "I was hungry!"

Lian An cracked one eye open to find her three spectral companions squatting around an invisible picnic on the floorboards. Fen Yu was holding an apple that had mysteriously vanished from the fruit basket; Wei Rong had stolen two pastries; and Li Shen was pretending to sip tea from thin air.

"You three promised not to cause chaos on the journey."

"We didn't cause chaos!" Wei Rong protested indignantly. "We're just nourishing our souls!"

"You don't even have stomachs," she muttered.

Fen Yu pouted. "We trained! We can taste food now! We need to practice or we'll forget!"

Li Shen added, "It's purely educational. I'm comparing the flavor profiles of mortal and celestial confections."

Lian An stared flatly at him. "You're eating sugar buns, not studying the cosmos."

The three ghosts exchanged guilty looks.

She groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead. "I'm surrounded by idiots."

The ghosts grinned in unison. "Your Majesty's loyal idiots!"

That earned them an exasperated laugh despite herself.

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## Arrival at the Palace

By the time the gates of the imperial palace loomed ahead, the sun had dipped low and the sky burned orange.

The grand red walls rose high and familiar—comforting in structure, suffocating in presence. Servants rushed forward to greet her carriage, bowing deeply.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty," they chorused.

Lian An stepped down gracefully, the hem of her pale silk robe trailing over the stone path. Her expression was calm, regal—but inside, a sigh trembled.

Back to the cage, she thought quietly.

Her ghosts floated behind her invisibly as she walked toward her quarters, whispering excitedly.

"Everything's so shiny!" Fen Yu gushed. "Do we get rooms too?"

Wei Rong thumped his ghostly chest. "I'll take the western corridor—guard duty!"

Li Shen was already analyzing the calligraphy on the pillars. "Still lacks poetic symmetry."

Lian An shot them a look. "Behave. No haunting, no pranks, no—"

Fen Yu interrupted, "Food?"

Wei Rong joined in, "Dinner?"

Li Shen added softly, "Your Majesty, the human realm's travel is tiring. Surely we deserve a small feast."

She stopped walking and turned slowly, eyes narrowing. "I haven't even unpacked."

They blinked at her innocently.

"You three are incorrigible," she muttered.

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## A Ghostly Riot

By nightfall, the Empress's chambers were quiet—or so everyone thought.

Inside, however, chaos was brewing.

While Lian An tried to rest, Fen Yu had invaded the kitchen. The smell of sesame oil and steamed buns wafted down the corridor as invisible hands rummaged through shelves.

Wei Rong was "helping," which meant tossing spices into the air and guessing the smell. "This one's pepper! Or cinnamon! No—definitely pepper!"

Li Shen hovered over a recipe scroll, reading with dramatic seriousness. "Step three: simmer gently for one incense stick's time. Fascinating! Mortals really cook this way."

When Lian An walked in, her jaw dropped.

"What—what are you doing?!"

Fen Yu froze mid-air, holding a pan. "Cooking!"

"With what permission?"

"We were starving!" Wei Rong said defensively. "And your mortal cooks refused to serve ghosts!"

"That's because they can't see you!"

Li Shen turned calmly. "Your Majesty, if we do not eat now, our new celestial stomachs will shrink."

"That's not how physiology or ghosts work!" she yelled.

Then, a loud boom!

Fen Yu had accidentally heated oil too fast. The pan puffed out a small flame.

Lian An slapped her forehead. "I swear, the heavens sent you three to test my patience."

The trio froze guiltily.

Finally, she sighed. "Fine. Move aside. I'll cook."

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## The Empress Cooks Again

Once she took charge, order returned swiftly. The servants peeked through the doors, stunned to see their Empress personally tying an apron over her silk robe.

"Your Majesty—shall we—?"

"No need," she said with a calm smile. "I'll handle this."

Her hands moved deftly, confident and elegant. She kneaded dough for steamed buns, chopped ginger and scallions with precision, and stirred broth that filled the air with warmth and spice.

"Are we helping?" Fen Yu asked hopefully.

"You'll stay still," Lian An said firmly.

Wei Rong sniffed the pot, his ghostly aura flickering in bliss. "Smells divine."

Li Shen hovered near the table, writing imaginary tasting notes. "Complex yet balanced. A triumph of human craft."

She made three dishes—

Lotus Root and Pork Soup simmered until tender and fragrant.

Pan-fried dumplings filled with vegetables and herbs from her garden.

Sweet almond pudding drizzled with honey for dessert.

When she plated them, even the ghosts bowed reverently.

"Your Majesty," Fen Yu said solemnly, "if we had bodies, we'd kneel."

Lian An rolled her eyes. "Eat quietly before I change my mind."

The three dug in with childlike joy, making dramatic noises of delight.

"Ahhh, I missed this taste!" Fen Yu sighed.

"Truly, the mortal realm is blessed," Wei Rong declared.

Li Shen dabbed his mouth with air. "I shall compose a poem about this pudding."

She smiled faintly despite herself. "At least you're easy to please."

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The Gift for Princess Zhi

As she began cleaning up, her gaze fell on a bowl of soup still steaming gently on the counter.

A thought struck her.

"Princess Zhi," she murmured. The Emperor's younger brother's wife—pregnant, lonely, often sick. She had always liked Lian An's cooking during earlier palace visits.

Without a second thought, the Empress packed a tray herself—lotus soup, two dumplings, and a small bowl of almond pudding. She told her maid softly, "Send this to Princess Zhi's quarters. Tell her it's something warm for her health."

The maid blinked. "Your Majesty, you made it yourself?"

Lian An smiled. "Who else?"

When the maid left, Fen Yu floated beside her. "You're too kind, you know. That princess might start expecting dinner every day."

"She needs strength," Lian An replied simply. "And kindness doesn't cost much."

Wei Rong grinned. "Except sleep."

Lian An gave him a look. "Sleep is overrated."

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A Moment of Quiet

Later that night, when all dishes were gone and the ghosts had finally quieted—curled up like lazy cats near the window—Lian An sat alone by the lantern light.

Her fingers traced the edge of the teacup.

She thought of her family, their laughter, the simplicity of home. Then of the palace—its cold marble, its politics, and the endless dance of appearances.

And somewhere in between, she found herself smiling.

Because even here, surrounded by schemers and ghosts—literal ones this time—she'd carved a small piece of peace for herself.

The smell of soup lingered faintly in the air. Outside, the moon hung low and silver, bathing the courtyard in quiet glow.

Fen Yu's sleepy mumble floated from the window. "Your Majesty... if you cook again tomorrow... make noodles..."

Lian An laughed softly, setting down her cup. "Go to sleep, you glutton."

And for the first time since leaving her family, the palace didn't feel so lonely.