

Ghost 78

Chapter 78: the weight of obedience

The afternoon light spilled through the lattice windows of the Empress's quarters, warm and quiet. The world outside hummed with the faint rhythm of palace life—servants murmuring, wind brushing the silk banners—but inside, everything stood still.

Lian An sat by the carved sandalwood table, her tea long gone cold. The ghosts were asleep for once, drifting in lazy coils of mist near the window. The peace felt fragile, almost borrowed.

She should have felt relieved to be home after the long weeks at her father's estate. Yet her heart sat heavy. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the blood on the Duke's robes—the arrow jutting from his shoulder, the chaos of that night. She remembered running barefoot through the marble corridors, her night robe tangled, the Emperor trying to stop her, and the wild slap that had rung through the moonlit garden.

She had only wanted to reach her father, she told herself. She hadn't meant to raise her hand to anyone.

But palace memory was long and merciless.

A single mistake could echo like thunder.

The Summons

The quiet shattered with a knock.

Her chief maid entered, bowing so low that her forehead brushed the floor. "Your Majesty... the Grand Eunuch Zhao seeks audience. He carries a message from the Empress Dowager."

Lian An looked up, startled. "From Her Majesty? At this hour?"

Before the maid could answer, Eunuch Zhao himself stepped through the curtain. He was tall, sharp-featured, his voice as smooth as porcelain.

He bowed. "This humble servant conveys the Dowager Empress's decree. Her Majesty is to present herself in the Jade Serenity Hall at once."

Lian An's fingers tightened around her sleeve. "Did she... say why?"

"The Dowager Empress did not explain." His eyes flickered once, sympathetic, then dropped. "Only that the matter is urgent."

A hush fell over the chamber. Even the ghosts stirred uneasily, the faint shimmer of their forms reflecting her anxiety.

Fen Yu whispered, "Maybe she wants to praise you for the banquet?"

Wei Rong muttered, "Or feed you to the tigers."

Lian An rose, forcing a calm she didn't feel. "Enough. Stay here."

She straightened her robe and walked out into the fading light, the long corridor stretching before her like a test she'd walked too many times before.

The Jade Serenity Hall

The air in the hall was thick with incense and judgment.

The Dowager Empress sat at the high seat, her robes the color of molten gold, her expression carved from ice. Rows of attendants lined the walls, silent as stone.

Lian An stopped at the threshold and bowed. "This daughter-in-law greets the Dowager Empress."

No answer came.

Only the sound of a teacup shattering at her feet.

Hot liquid splashed across the polished tiles, soaking into her hem.

"On your knees," came the cold command.

Lian An sank down slowly, eyes lowered. "Your Majesty, may I ask—"

"Ask?" The Dowager's voice cut sharp enough to draw blood. "You dare ask?"

She rose from her throne, each step echoing like thunder. "You bring shame upon this dynasty! You shoved the Emperor—your husband—before witnesses and struck Lady Chen in empor chamber!"

The words landed heavy, final. Whispers trembled along the row of maids.

Lian An's pulse jumped. "Your Majesty, I didnt mean to—"

The Dowager's hand slammed against the table. "Silence!"

A hairpin quivered in her silver-streaked bun as she leaned forward, eyes blazing. "Did you think I would not hear? The Emperor himself restrained you that night, yet you defied him! You paraded through the palace barefoot in your nightdress, wailing like a madwoman. Do you imagine that such disgrace will be forgiven because your father lies wounded?"

The last words pierced deepest.

Lian An bowed lower, her voice barely a whisper. "I was frightened... I lost control. I meant no disrespect and your___."

"Frightened," the Dowager repeated, contempt curling the word. "A child may claim fear. You are Empress. The Mother of this Empire's women. You will behave as such—or I will make you remember what that title costs."

Lian An felt the burn of humiliation crawl up her neck, but she forced herself to breathe evenly. "This daughter-in-law accepts Your Majesty's correction."

The Dowager smiled thinly—victory gleaming in her eyes. "Good. Then you will be corrected."

The Punishment

"Eunuch Zhao," the Dowager said coldly, "take Her Majesty to the ancestral hall. She shall kneel and copy the Sacred Scriptures of Virtue for three days and nights—without rest."

The eunuch bowed low. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"She will be fed twice daily," the Dowager continued, "only thin porridge and water. Her robes shall be plain. Ten attendants will watch to ensure obedience. If she slackens or speaks, she will receive twenty blows from the rod."

A tremor rippled through the chamber.

Even the eunuch hesitated. "Three days, Your Majesty?"

"Perhaps longer if her heart remains unruly." The Dowager's tone softened into cruelty. "It will teach humility."

Lian An lifted her eyes slightly. "Your Majesty, may I—"

"Not another word!" The Dowager's voice cracked like a whip. "You will kneel until repentance becomes second nature. You have brought embarrassment enough. Now you will learn silence."

The words fell like stones, final and absolute.

Lian An exhaled, letting the storm pass over her. "I understand."

The Dowager waited, expecting tears, begging, even a plea for mercy. None came. Only the calm, steady voice of a woman who refused to break.

The old woman's eyes narrowed. "Still proud," she murmured. "You think yourself noble because you suffer quietly."

Then, with a flick of her hand: "Take her."

The Walk of Shame

The hall doors swung open. Guards stepped forward, their expressions blank, respectful but distant.

Lian An rose, every movement composed. Her robe trailed behind her, heavy with spilled tea and indignity.

As she stepped into the courtyard, the cool evening wind hit her face, carrying the faint scent of lotus and ash. Lanterns glimmered above the eaves, indifferent to her fall from grace.

The ghosts appeared the moment the guards were out of earshot—three faint shapes hovering in alarm.

Fen Yu wrung her hands. "What did that old witch say?"

Lian An smiled faintly. "That I'm to study virtue."

Wei Rong's voice flared. "Virtue! She wants you to starve!"

Li Shen floated beside her, quiet but grave. "Three days of kneeling will wound your knees. We could... interfere."

"No," Lian An said softly. "She wants to see me bend. I will not give her that."

They fell silent, following like shadows as the procession moved through the moonlit walkways toward the edge of the palace.

The Ancestral Hall

The hall waited like a tomb. Tall wooden doors loomed above, carved with the names of dead emperors. Inside, incense coiled thick and slow around the ancestral tablets.

The guards stopped. "Her Majesty will remain here until the Dowager commands otherwise."

Eunuch Zhao hesitated, his voice low. "Forgive this servant, Your Majesty... but please, endure quietly. The Dowager watches everything."

Lian An inclined her head. "I know. You may go."

The doors shut with a deep, final thud.

Cold air pressed in. Ten attendants stationed themselves along the walls, eyes averted but orders clear: observe, report, obey.

She knelt before the altar, the chill of stone seeping through silk. The writing table had been prepared—a brush, inkstone, scrolls of pristine parchment waiting for her submission.

She dipped the brush into ink, the black pooling like shadow. The first words of scripture gleamed as she wrote:

"The virtue of patience begins in restraint; the virtue of harmony begins in silence."

A cruel irony, perhaps, but she copied each character without tremor.

Hours stretched thin. Her knees burned, her shoulders stiffened. Still she wrote. Her ghosts hovered at the far edge of the hall, helpless and restless.

Fen Yu whispered, "At least let us bring you water."

Lian An smiled faintly. "I have water."

Wei Rong grumbled. "If you faint, we'll haunt that Dowager till her hair falls out."

Li Shen said quietly, "Your strength frightens even the living."

Her brush paused for a heartbeat, and then she whispered, "It's not strength. It's necessity."

The First Night

By midnight, the ink had begun to blur in her vision. The faint tremor in her wrist grew stronger, but she refused to stop.

The attendants whispered among themselves. "She hasn't complained once."

"Doesn't she ache?"

"She hasn't even drunk the porridge."

One of them—young, timid—finally whispered, "Maybe she's not human at all."

Lian An's lips curved slightly at that. Not human... perhaps that's how one survives this palace.

When dawn finally touched the high windows, she was still kneeling, brush in hand, the parchment before her filled with flawless script.

Her ghosts hovered close, awed and afraid.

Fen Yu murmured, "They'll never break you, will they?"

Lian An looked up at the pale morning light and whispered, "They can bruise the body. But not the will."

The hall stood silent, holding its breath as the sun rose—witness to a woman's quiet defiance dressed as obedience.