

Ghost 79

Chapter 79: a bowl of warmth

Night lay gentle over the Inner Palace, silver light spilling across jade roofs and quiet courtyards. The world had settled into sleep — except for the flickering lamps in Princess Zhi's chamber.

Inside, the air was heavy with the sweet scent of medicinal herbs. A small brazier glowed near the couch, and the princess lay half-sitting among embroidered pillows, one hand resting lightly over her rounded stomach.

She slept peacefully — something rare these past months.

Her personal maid, Yun'er, smiled as she quietly arranged the bedding. The bowl of food the Empress had sent earlier — delicate congee infused with fruit and calming herbs — sat empty on the nearby table.

Princess Zhi's cravings and morning sickness had tormented her for weeks, but tonight, for the first time in ages, her body rested easily. Her dreams drifted soft and light, full of laughter and the faint, comforting taste of the meal she'd eaten.

When she woke at dawn, the light was thin and blue across her chamber.

"Yun'er," she said sleepily, "what time is it?"

"Nearly sunrise, Your Highness." The maid smiled. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," the princess said softly. "It must be because of the Empress's cooking." She reached to touch her stomach, eyes warm with gratitude. "Tell her the food she sent last night was a blessing. My child kicked gently instead of twisting."

Yun'er's smile faltered. "Your Highness... the Empress..."

"What is it?"

The maid hesitated, lowering her eyes. "The Empress Dowager punished Her Majesty last night."

Princess Zhi blinked, confusion overtaking her drowsiness. "Punished? For what?"

"She... she's confined in the ancestral hall," Yun'er whispered. "They say she must copy scriptures for three days while kneeling. Only plain porridge for meals."

The porcelain cup in the princess's hand trembled. "Kneeling? In that cold place? She just returned from her father's estate — her health must still be weak!"

Yun'er nodded nervously. "They say the Dowager was furious about the night Her Majesty lost control. The incident with Lady Chen and the Emperor..."

Zhi pressed a hand to her chest, frowning deeply. "That was grief, not rebellion." Her voice softened, thick with feeling. "She found out her father was wounded — any daughter would have broken. How cruel this palace is to turn sorrow into crime."

The maid lowered her gaze. "No one dares to intervene, Your Highness."

Zhi exhaled sharply, then looked toward the half-empty bowl still on her table. "She once sent me food when I could not eat. She said, 'Let your body rest before your heart breaks.'" Her lips curved faintly, though her eyes glistened. "It's my turn now."

A Quiet Rebellion

"Yun'er," she said suddenly. "Fetch the kitchen maid who delivers meals to the ancestral hall."

The maid blinked. "Your Highness—"

"Now," Zhi said firmly. "Quickly and quietly."

Moments later, the girl arrived — a small, anxious kitchen servant with flour-dusted hands and wide, frightened eyes. She fell to her knees the instant she entered. "Your Highness—"

Princess Zhi gestured for calm. "Rise. I will not harm you."

The girl trembled. "I only carry food, Your Highness, I do not—"

"I know." Zhi's tone softened. "Tell me what the Empress will eat today."

The maid swallowed. "Plain porridge, Your Highness. Just boiled millet and water, no salt, no oil."

Zhi's fingers tightened around her sleeve. "She's already weak. That will only make her sicker."

She took a slow breath, then looked at Yun'er. "Prepare a new pot of congee — lotus seed and red date. Add crushed goji berries and ginseng. She needs strength."

Yun'er hesitated. "But if the Dowager learns—"

"She will not," the princess said. Her voice was quiet, but its resolve carried the weight of steel. "When you deliver the Empress's food, distract the guards and exchange the bowls. Leave a small note under the tray."

Yun'er bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Highness."

Zhi's hand drifted to her stomach again, feeling the soft flutter beneath her palm. "A mother must protect those who show kindness. Even if they are not of her blood."

The Exchange

When the noon bells rang, the palace kitchen bustled with noise. Steam rose from dozens of pots; servants hurried with trays and baskets.

At the far table, Yun'er stirred the golden congee, the faint scent of herbs blending with rice. She added a sprig of mint — Lian An's favorite garnish — and poured it into a plain bowl identical to the one meant for punishment.

Then she slipped a small folded note beneath the tray.

When the food courier passed, Yun'er smiled innocently. "Ah, I heard the Empress's porridge cooled. The Dowager dislikes delays — take this fresh one instead. Hot and proper."

The servant blinked, half-panicked but obedient. "Y-Yes!"

She hurried away, unaware of the quiet rebellion she carried in her hands.

The Ancestral Hall

The air inside the hall was cold enough to numb the bones.

Lian An knelt before the altar, brush trembling slightly in her tired hand. Her knees ached, the parchment blurred, but she kept writing.

The scripture blurred into a blur of ink and pain. Virtue begins in obedience; peace begins in silence...

Her lips pressed together. "Silence, yes," she muttered softly. "But not forever."

A sound broke the stillness — the creak of doors, the shuffle of feet.

"Your meal, Your Majesty."

The attendant placed the tray before her and stepped back. The smell hit first — sweet, fragrant, full.

Lian An frowned.

It wasn't the watery porridge she had been given the previous night. This was rich — soft rice cooked with something medicinal, almost floral.

She leaned closer. "This isn't..."

Then she saw it — a tiny slip of paper tucked under the bowl.

Her heart skipped.

When the attendants turned away, she carefully slid it free and opened it.

The handwriting was delicate, slanted — unmistakably Princess Zhi's.

> My sister, the food you once sent helped me through sleepless nights. Allow me to return the favor. Eat, regain your strength. You are not forgotten.

— Zhi

For a moment, the world blurred before her eyes.

Her throat tightened painfully.

After all the humiliation, after the cold stares and whispered gossip, someone — anyone — still remembered she was human.

She lifted the bowl with trembling hands. Steam rose, carrying the scent of lotus and dates. The first spoonful burned her tongue slightly, but the warmth spread down her chest like sunlight.

For the first time since the punishment began, she smiled.

Her ghosts drifted near, wide-eyed.

Fen Yu sniffed the air. "Is that... ginseng?"

Wei Rong leaned closer. "That's real food!"

Li Shen nodded approvingly. "I smell red dates. And rebellion."

Lian An chuckled softly, wiping the corners of her eyes. "It's from Princess Zhi."

"The pregnant one?" Fen Yu whispered. "The one who vomits every hour?"

"The same," Lian An said. "Seems my cooking finally cured her enough to plot crimes."

Her ghosts laughed — a small, quiet sound that made the hall feel less like a tomb.

Lian An ate slowly, savoring every bite. Each mouthful tasted like gratitude, like proof that kindness could still bloom even in poisoned soil.

When the bowl was empty, she folded the note neatly and tucked it inside her sleeve, close to her heart.

The Quiet Resolve

That night, when the attendants dozed at their posts and the oil lamps flickered low, Lian An sat back and stared at the altar flames.

Her mind drifted — not to pain or anger, but to thought.

The Dowager wanted to starve her into obedience. The Emperor had said nothing, done nothing.

So be it.

If no one would protect her, she would learn to protect herself.

She had already proven she could create something valuable. The restaurant she'd secretly founded, The Whisper Bowl, had brought warmth and happiness to others. Her ghosts adored it, and even courtiers whispered of its food.

What if there were more?

What if she opened more kitchens — not just one, but three, across the capital? Hidden under trusted names, earning silver quietly. Enough to feed herself and those who followed her.

Her ghosts, listening, exchanged glances.

Fen Yu whispered, "You're smiling like a fox."

"I'm thinking," Lian An said. "Of a future where I don't have to kneel for anyone."

Wei Rong grinned, crossing ghostly arms. "A Queen of Kitchens instead of Thrones. I like it."

Li Shen added gently, "And what of the Emperor?"

Her eyes dimmed. She gazed into the flickering lamp for a long while before answering.

"The Emperor," she said softly, "will be fine without me. He already is."

A breeze stirred the lamps, making the shadows dance.

Her voice was calm, but in her heart a quiet vow was forming — stronger than the Dowager's decrees, quieter than rebellion, sharper than grief.

One day, she would rise from these cold floors. She would walk away from a throne that demanded her silence and find a life where laughter didn't cost loyalty.

A life of her own making.

And when that day came, she would never again bow before anyone who mistook her kindness for weakness.

The moon climbed high above the palace, silver and unbothered, shining on two women bound by quiet defiance — one kneeling in punishment, one lying awake with her unborn child — and between them, a single bowl of warm porridge that carried more rebellion than a thousand swords.