

## Ghost 83

Chapter 83: the ghostly proposal

Morning sunlight crept gently across the carved screen, filling the Empress's chamber with pale warmth. The incense had burned low overnight, leaving only a faint trace of sandalwood in the air.

On the bed, Lian An lay still, her lashes casting shadows against her cheeks. For the first time in days, she was asleep without pain flickering through her face. The room was quiet — even her ghostly companions had tiptoed into hiding, fearful that the smallest noise might wake her from her hard-earned rest.

Her maid, Yun'er, slipped inside with careful grace, holding a small lacquered box. She placed it on the table beside the bed and whispered to another maid, "This came from the Emperor's personal envoy. He said it's to be applied twice daily."

The other girl nodded, curiosity lighting her eyes. "What is it?"

Yun'er opened the lid. Inside rested a tiny porcelain jar sealed with gold thread. Its label read in elegant Eastern script: Lily Bone-Strengthening Cream — for swelling, scars, and bruised joints.

Even the faint scent that escaped was divine — cool, floral, faintly sweet.

"It's from the Eastern lands," Yun'er murmured, impressed. "Rare. Only the Emperor's men could buy this."

When Lian An stirred and slowly blinked awake, the first thing she saw was the jar glinting on the bedside table.

Her maid rushed to her side. "Your Majesty, forgive the intrusion — the Emperor sent this for you. He said it will soothe the pain in your knees and strengthen your wrists."

Lian An's expression didn't change. She simply stared at the jar for a long moment, then gave a quiet, humorless laugh.

"The Emperor sent it himself?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. His personal messenger delivered it. He said His Majesty was... concerned."

Lian An sat up slowly, the effort making her wince. Her wrists trembled slightly as she reached for the jar. She turned it in her hands, the smooth porcelain cold against her skin.

"Concerned," she repeated softly, the word tasting bitter.

She smiled, but the expression didn't reach her eyes. "How generous of him — a jar of cream for my pain. Pity disguised as care."

Her maid lowered her head, too afraid to answer.

Lian An unscrewed the lid, dipped a finger into the silky ointment, and applied it carefully to her bruised wrist. The coolness seeped into her skin, soothing the ache — but not the ache in her heart.

She muttered under her breath, "He should save this for his conscience. It's more bruised than my knees."

Her maid tried to hide a smile, pretending to arrange the pillows.

"Still," Lian An added, "it would be rude not to accept a gift. Tell the servants I've received it with thanks. No need to trouble His Majesty further."

Her voice was calm, her tone polite — the perfect Empress mask restored.

But when Yun'er left, the faint smirk that curved her lips was pure rebellion.

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## A Second Gift

An hour later, another knock came at the door.

"Enter," Lian An said softly, expecting her maid again.

Instead, a young palace boy stepped in, holding a square wooden box wrapped in plain cloth. He bowed nervously. "Your Majesty, this was left outside the courtyard. There's no sender's name."

Lian An frowned slightly, motioning for him to set it down. "Leave it."

When he left, she carefully untied the wrapping. Inside was a smaller box of fine sandalwood, and within that — bundles of dried herbs, small bottles of tonic, and a folded piece of paper.

She didn't need to open the letter to know who had sent it.

Only one person in this entire palace had the courage — or the kindness — to send her something without expecting anything in return.

Princess Zhi.

Lian An unfolded the note and read the neat, hurried handwriting:

> Your Majesty, please rest well. I have added herbs for your joints and tonic to rebuild your strength. You are not alone. I will visit when I can. — Zhi

Her throat tightened. For a long moment, she just stared at the words, the ink slightly smudged as if the princess had written them in haste.

Lian An placed a hand over the note and closed her eyes. "At least one soul in this cursed palace remembers what kindness means."

She smiled faintly, whispering to herself, "When I am well again, I'll repay her. I'll send her warm meals every week — not just for her health, but for her heart."

The thought of the gentle princess made her chest ache with both gratitude and sorrow.

The day she transmigrated she had stood alone — fighting whispers, cold glances, and a husband whose affection was as fickle as the wind. Yet in this brief alliance of compassion between women, she felt the faintest spark of hope.

She tucked the letter under her pillow like a secret promise.

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Dreams and Ghostly Drama

Night fell early that day. The lanterns outside her chamber glowed softly, casting halos of gold against the wooden screens.

Lian An had just begun to drift toward sleep when she heard a loud "BOOM!" from her balcony — followed by the unmistakable sound of her ghostly companions arguing.

She groaned. "Not again..."

The door burst open with a gust of cold air and chaos.

Fen Yu, the fiery ghost girl, floated in first, her sleeves fluttering like banners of disaster. "Your Majesty! The palace is buzzing! Huge news!"

Behind her came Wei Rong, the general ghost, looking both excited and terrified. "You won't believe this one."

And finally, Li Shen, the scholar ghost, drifted in holding a rolled-up scroll that he probably stole from somewhere. "Confirmed! The news is official!"

Lian An pinched the bridge of her nose. "If this is another story about the haunted tea house or ghost fights over inkstones, I swear—"

"No, no!" Fen Yu interrupted, eyes glowing. "The neighbouring kingdom — the one with the most handsome men and beautiful women — their young Emperor is coming to visit! He's bringing his nobles and scholars to form an alliance!"

Wei Rong added dramatically, "They say his guards are taller than pines and their princesses so fair they make jade look dull!"

Li Shen nodded solemnly. "It's true. Even the palace cooks are talking about it. Apparently, they'll stay here for an entire month."

Lian An raised an eyebrow, half amused, half confused. "And what exactly does this have to do with you three?"

Fen Yu puffed her chest proudly. "Everything! We've decided we're moving there!"

Lian An blinked. "Moving... there?"

"Yes!" Fen Yu declared. "That kingdom sounds wonderful! Maybe they'll appreciate talented ghosts like us! I could marry a general ghost there, Wei Rong could open a spirit training hall, and Li Shen could teach literature to handsome scholar spirits!"

Lian An choked back a laugh. "You're all insane."

Wei Rong nodded seriously. "I could finally have ghost children to carry on my heroic name."

Lian An stared at him, utterly deadpan. "You're dead, General. Your... heroic lineage has ended."

He froze, processing her words, then looked horrified. "What?! No heirs?! That can't be right!"

Fen Yu gasped dramatically. "You mean... ghosts can't have ghost babies?!"

Li Shen adjusted his nonexistent glasses. "Biologically impossible. No pulse, no blood circulation, no reproduction."

The realization hit them all at once. The three ghosts turned to Lian An with heartbroken faces.

"Your Majesty!" Fen Yu wailed. "We'll never have families?!"

Lian An bit her lip to keep from laughing. "You have each other. And me. That's already a handful of a family."

"But we wanted little ghostlings!" Fen Yu sobbed. "Tiny ones who'd steal snacks and scare servants!"

Wei Rong looked dramatically to the ceiling. "Fate is cruel!"

Li Shen floated to a corner, muttering, "Even death has bureaucracy..."

Lian An finally burst into laughter, clutching her sore ribs. "Heavens, you three are hopeless!"

Fen Yu crossed her arms, pouting. "You're laughing at our pain!"

"I'm laughing because you're ridiculous," Lian An said between chuckles. "Now stop crying and go back to haunting someone else before I send you to scrub the palace walls."

But the three ghosts only sniffled louder, floating in exaggerated despair.

"Your Majesty," Wei Rong said gravely, "we may be dead, but our dreams are alive."

"Yes," Fen Yu said dramatically, "and now those dreams are crushed."

"Like your common sense," Lian An muttered.

They all glared at her for a moment — then, one by one, they floated sulkily out of the room, their faint sobbing echoing down the corridor.

The Empress shook her head, still smiling. "Truly, even the afterlife has its share of fools."

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Rest at Last

When silence finally returned, Lian An lay back on her pillows, her laughter fading into a soft sigh.

Her body still ached, her knees were still swollen — but her spirit felt lighter than it had in weeks. Between the Emperor's hollow pity, the Princess's quiet compassion, and her ghosts' ridiculous dreams, she realized life — even in a gilded cage — could still make her laugh.

She traced her finger over the letter hidden under her pillow, whispered a small prayer for Princess Zhi's safety, and closed her eyes.

The night breeze carried the faint scent of lilies from the cream jar — cool, distant, almost kind.

But in her heart, she thought with a quiet smirk,

Let him send all the creams he wants. I'll heal myself. And when I stand again, this palace will remember who I am.

The moonlight fell gently across her face. Her ghosts drifted somewhere above the roofs, arguing softly about ghost weddings and afterlife babies, their voices fading into laughter and stars.