

Ghost 84

Chapter 84: the table of mask

The morning sun had climbed high by the time Emperor Rong Zhen rose from his study. Scrolls lay scattered across the table — maps of the northern borders, reports of supplies, letters from generals — yet none of them could hold his attention.

A faint headache pulsed between his temples. He rubbed them slowly, exhaling.

The doors opened, and his personal messenger bowed low. "Your Majesty, the lily cream has been delivered to Her Majesty the Empress as ordered. She accepted it with gratitude."

Rong Zhen nodded curtly. "Did she say anything else?"

The messenger hesitated. "No, Your Majesty. She appeared calm. Grateful, but... distant."

"Distant?" the Emperor repeated quietly.

"Yes, Sire. She didn't cry or complain. Simply thanked this servant and returned to rest."

Rong Zhen leaned back, fingers drumming the armrest. The messenger bowed again and retreated, leaving silence behind.

For a long time, the Emperor stared at the faint light filtering through the lattice.

No tears.

No pleading.

No remorse.

She had simply accepted the cream as though it meant nothing.

He frowned, irritated by a feeling he couldn't quite name.

He had expected anger, perhaps defiance. But silence? Acceptance? That unsettled him more than any argument could.

At least she could have cried, he thought bitterly. She could have shown she regretted her actions.

He remembered that night too clearly — her sharp eyes blazing, the sting of her palm as she slapped Lady Chen, the way she had pushed him when he tried to stop her.

No fear, no hesitation. Just raw fury.

And then... nothing.

No apology.

No tearful plea.

It made him feel like the villain in his own palace.

He exhaled sharply, as though to drive the thought away.

"She's stubborn," he muttered to himself. "Always was."

He rose and crossed to the mirror. The reflection staring back at him was composed — a ruler in embroidered silk, the picture of imperial discipline — but the shadow behind his eyes told another story.

Somewhere deep inside, beneath layers of pride and duty, was a small whisper of guilt.

She's your wife.

He closed his eyes briefly.

Yes. She was his wife.

But she had never been the one he wanted.

When the court insisted he marry the Duke's daughter, he had obeyed out of duty, not affection.

Lian An had been the jewel of the capital — elegant, intelligent, untouchable. The court adored her, the nobles envied her. Even the Dowager praised the match.

At the time, he had felt nothing but irritation.

She had stood before him, flawless and poised, her beauty like ice — distant, perfect, unapproachable.

He had thought, This is the woman they expect me to spend my life with? A creature carved from pride?

She had looked down at him then — not rudely, but with that same calm certainty that everything around her must bow to her order.

And perhaps that was where it began — that silent war of pride between them.

She never begged for affection, never sought his approval, never softened to please him.

In the beginning, he had admired her composure. Later, it felt like insult.

Now... he wasn't sure what he felt anymore.

He glanced toward the door, where the eunuch waited respectfully.

"Prepare the carriage," he said quietly. "We'll visit Lady Chen's palace for lunch."

The Palace of Red Peonies

The Palace of Red Peonies, Lady Chen's residence, was a place of soft laughter and constant fragrance. Even the air seemed tinted with her perfume.

When Rong Zhen entered, the maids dropped to their knees, their voices sweet in greeting.

Lady Chen herself rose from the inner chamber, her smile radiant, her crimson dress flowing like a blossom come to life.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing low. "You honor us with your presence."

Behind her, her mother — the Lady Chen mother — stood as well, her smile calculated and smooth. "The palace is brighter when you visit, Your Majesty."

The Emperor inclined his head politely. "I trust both of you are well?"

"Very well," Lady Chen's mother replied eagerly. "My daughter is finally gaining back her appetite. Her health is glowing — your care must be the reason."

Lady Chen's cheeks turned pink, her eyes dropping modestly. "Mother..."

Rong Zhen gave a faint smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "That's good to hear."

The three of them settled around the long lacquered table. Servants entered with trays of fragrant dishes — honeyed duck, lotus soup, rice steamed with plum.

Lady Chen poured tea with graceful precision, her voice gentle. "I heard you were very busy with court matters. It must be exhausting, Your Majesty."

"It's part of the throne," he said, lifting his cup. "The borders need reinforcement before the cold season."

Her mother leaned forward eagerly. "Ah, yes. You've always been diligent, even as a boy. The empire flourishes under your care."

He nodded absently, his gaze slipping past them toward the garden beyond the open doors.

The laughter of women floated faintly from somewhere — a reminder of life outside his endless duties. Yet in the midst of it, a single thought refused to leave him.

Lian An never laughed like that anymore.

He clenched his hand around the cup.

Lady Chen's mother noticed his distraction but mistook it for fatigue. "You should rest more, Your Majesty. Spend time with those who make you happy."

At that, Lady Chen smiled shyly.

The Emperor cleared his throat, uncomfortable. "Let's eat."

Lunch with Masks

The meal was light and pleasant on the surface — polite laughter, careful compliments, small talk about the palace gardens and the upcoming alliance visit.

But beneath it all, he felt the air thick with unspoken things.

Lady Chen's mother spoke often — about family, about heirs, about "the future of the imperial bloodline."

"The Dowager often says," she began delicately, "that stability comes when the Emperor's descendants are secure. Surely, Your Majesty must think of continuing the line soon."

Rong Zhen's chopsticks froze midair.

Lady Chen blushed furiously, lowering her eyes.

Her mother smiled meaningfully. "My daughter is healthy and virtuous. The Dowager herself said she'd pray for good news soon."

The Emperor exhaled slowly, setting his bowl down. "In time," he said evenly. "These things cannot be forced."

Lady Chen's mother pressed on, smiling sweetly. "Of course. But the Dowager is eager. She wishes to hold her grandson before the next winter."

At that, the Dowager's voice suddenly echoed in his memory — "Give me a grandson soon."

She had said it countless times, smiling like it was a blessing, not a command.

Rong Zhen forced a polite smile, hiding the irritation curling in his chest.

When the meal ended, he rose first, bowing slightly. "The food was excellent. Thank you both."

Lady Chen stood quickly, bowing gracefully. "Your Majesty, must you leave so soon? Perhaps rest a while?"

He shook his head. "Court papers await. The generals have sent new reports from the north."

Her eyes dimmed slightly, but she nodded obediently.

He turned to her mother. "Lady Chen, please take care of you and your mother. The palace air grows colder this season."

"Always, Your Majesty," she said, smiling warmly.

He inclined his head once more and left the hall, his robe brushing softly across the floor.

The Emperor's Thoughts

As the palace doors closed behind him, silence settled.

He walked slowly through the garden path, the sound of his boots crunching against fallen petals.

Lady Chen's laughter echoed faintly from inside — light, perfect, rehearsed.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the weight of exhaustion in his bones.

The same conversations, he thought bitterly. The same smiles, the same expectations.

A grandson.

A perfect wife.

A perfect emperor.

And yet... his thoughts drifted back, unbidden, to the woman in the ancestral hall — the one who refused to cry, who refused to break.

Lian An.

He remembered her hands steady even while punished, her silence that cut deeper than words.

He had told himself she was arrogant, disrespectful, cold. But something in that image — her quiet endurance — made his chest twist in a way he didn't like.

Why didn't she beg? Why didn't she fight for his forgiveness?

He scowled, as though the thought itself were betrayal. "Forget it," he muttered under his breath. "Let her stay that way. Maybe time will teach her humility."

But as he reached the courtyard steps, he stopped.

A servant was passing by carrying a tray of white lilies — freshly picked for the shrines. Their scent drifted faintly in the breeze, pure and soft.

And suddenly, the image of Lian An's swollen knees, her pale face, her silence — all returned to him.

For a fleeting moment, something like regret flickered in his eyes.

Then he exhaled sharply, straightened his robes, and buried it.

An Emperor cannot afford softness, he reminded himself. She disrespected him. Disrespected the throne.

He lifted his chin, his expression turning cold once more.

"Forget her," he said quietly, walking away. "She made her bed."

The wind stirred the lilies behind him, scattering their petals across the path — pale, fragile, and fleeting, like the tenderness he refused to admit he still carried.