

Ghost 85

Chapter 85: ghostly nagging

Morning sunlight crept through the high windows of the palace, spilling across golden tiles and the polished bronze mirror that stood behind the Emperor's dressing screen.

The entire Hall of Radiant Harmony was alive with quiet movement. Servants stood in neat lines, holding folded robes, belts, and shoes. The air carried the scent of sandalwood and fresh silk.

The Emperor sat before the mirror, allowing his attendants to fasten his robe — a dark crimson garment embroidered with twin dragons. His face was calm, unreadable, as another servant carefully adjusted his crown.

Today was no ordinary day.

The delegation from the neighboring kingdom would arrive by noon, bringing with it ministers, scholars, and their young emperor. The court had prepared for weeks; banners were raised along the main road, soldiers lined the gates, and the capital pulsed with excitement.

The Emperor glanced at his reflection once, then lowered his gaze. "Is everything ready?" he asked quietly.

The chief eunuch bowed low. "Yes, Your Majesty. The main courtyard and throne hall have been cleaned since dawn. The musicians and attendants await your command."

The Emperor nodded. "Good. Send a message to the Empress's quarters."

The eunuch looked up, waiting for instruction.

"Tell her to prepare herself," the Emperor said evenly. "She will stand beside me to welcome the guests at noon. The Empress must represent the grace of our empire."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The eunuch bowed deeply and turned to leave.

The Emperor continued buttoning his outer robe, his expression as still as carved jade. For him, it was duty — another formal ceremony, another performance of power. He did not consider what that order might mean for the woman still recovering in her chamber.

The Message Arrives

In the Emerald Phoenix Hall, the Empress's chamber was quiet. The morning breeze lifted the gauze curtains, letting sunlight fall in slow golden patterns on the floor.

Lian An sat at a low table, her long hair unbound. She looked better than she had in days. The punishment had left her knees sore and her back stiff, but the tonics sent by Princess Zhi had begun to help. Her maid Yun'er brought her a bowl of porridge, light and fragrant with lotus seeds.

"Your Majesty, you should eat slowly," Yun'er said softly. "It's good that your appetite has returned."

Lian An smiled faintly, stirring the spoon through the steaming bowl. "Finally, food that doesn't taste like punishment."

For once, the morning felt peaceful. Even the ghosts were behaving.

Fen Yu, the mischievous one, floated near the window pretending to sip invisible tea. Wei Rong lounged by the screen like a lazy shadow, and Li Shen was sitting cross-legged mid-air, pretending to read an imaginary scroll.

Fen Yu spoke first, voice cheerful. "Your Majesty, today's breakfast looks delicious. Can we taste it through you?"

Lian An raised an eyebrow. "If you can figure out how, go ahead."

The three ghosts laughed and settled nearby, humming tunelessly while she ate.

But peace never lasted long in the palace.

The door flew open and a maid ran inside, breathless. "Your Majesty!"

Lian An looked up, startled. "What is it?"

The maid bowed quickly. "His Majesty has sent a command! The Emperor orders that at noon, Your Majesty must accompany him to welcome the royal guests from the neighboring kingdom. You are to prepare immediately."

The spoon froze in Lian An's hand. The warmth of the porridge suddenly felt far away.

For a long moment, she said nothing. The maid trembled under the weight of silence.

Then Lian An sighed — long and low — setting the spoon down gently. "He truly wants me dead," she muttered under her breath.

"Your Majesty?" the maid stammered.

Lian An looked at her with a faint, tired smile. "Three days kneeling in the ancestral hall until my bones nearly cracked, and now he wants me to stand for hours in front of guests. Truly, that man must believe I'm made of iron."

Yun'er flinched. "Should I tell His Majesty you are still unwell?"

Lian An shook her head slowly. "No. If I refuse, they'll say I disobey. Go tell them I will come. He clearly won't allow me rest. Let him see what kind of Empress he married."

The maid hesitated, then bowed and left quickly.

When the door closed, Lian An rubbed her temples and muttered again, "Uncultured man. Doesn't even understand compassion."

The Ghostly Commentary

Fen Yu's voice broke the silence first. "At least he wants you by his side. That means he still cares!"

Lian An gave her a sharp look. "Cares? He wants me to stand in front of half the world while my knees feel like fire. That's not care, that's cruelty."

Wei Rong laughed lazily. "Maybe he just wants to show everyone how beautiful his wife is."

"I'd rather be invisible," Lian An snapped.

Li Shen adjusted his imaginary scroll. "Perhaps he wishes to display harmony before the foreign envoys. A united emperor and empress symbolize strength."

Lian An sighed. "Then let him stand on sore legs for three days and see how harmonious that feels."

Her ghosts chuckled quietly, but Fen Yu wasn't done teasing.

"You know," she said, resting her chin in her hands, "the Emperor of the neighboring kingdom is supposed to be extremely handsome. I heard the palace maids gossiping this morning — they say his smile can melt hearts."

Lian An blinked, unimpressed. "And why are you telling me this?"

Fen Yu giggled. "Because maybe you'll finally have a crush!"

Lian An stared at her, stone-faced. "...Crush?"

Wei Rong clapped his ghostly hands. "Yes! Imagine — the Empress who never blushes! You'll look at him, he'll look at you, and sparks will fly."

She groaned softly. "You three have lost your minds."

Li Shen nodded seriously. "But it's good to keep your heart open. Maybe this emperor is gentle and kind, unlike ours."

Lian An rolled her eyes. "Gentle, kind, handsome — yes, yes. And made of air, like all of you. Please spare me your fantasies."

Fen Yu pouted. "You're too serious, Your Majesty. Life is boring without a little excitement."

Lian An took another bite of porridge. "Excitement got me kneeling in an ancestral hall for three days. I'll pass."

Wei Rong smirked. "You can at least admit the new emperor might be easier on the eyes than your husband."

Lian An shot him a warning look. "Be careful, or I'll have the monks exorcise all three of you today."

The ghosts immediately fell silent, pretending to eat again.

For a few moments, only the sound of her spoon touching the bowl filled the room. The sunlight caught the edge of her sleeve, turning the silk pale gold. Her hair fell loose over one shoulder, and the faintest trace of color had returned to her face.

Despite her irritation, a part of her felt lighter. The ghosts' nonsense was annoying — but it kept the loneliness away.

Her Decision

Yun'er returned, holding a folded robe. "Your Majesty, should we begin preparing? The Emperor's eunuch will return soon to check."

Lian An nodded slowly. "Yes. Bring the blue robe with the silver peonies. The simpler one — I won't wear extra jewels. If I must stand there like a statue, at least I'll be a comfortable one."

Yun'er bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Fen Yu floated closer. "Oh, the blue one! That's the robe that makes you look like moonlight."

Lian An smirked faintly. "Good. Maybe I'll blind them and escape."

Her ghosts laughed again, the sound light and echoing against the walls.

Li Shen observed softly, "You always endure, Your Majesty. Even when they push you past your limits."

Lian An didn't reply. She simply lifted the cup of tea, took a slow sip, and said in a low voice, "Because no one else will stand for me."

For a moment, even the ghosts went quiet.

Then Fen Yu broke the silence with a soft giggle. "Still, maybe the visiting emperor will fall for you at first sight. What if he writes poems about you?"

Lian An gave her a sideways glance. "If he does, I'll send them to you so you can decorate your imaginary grave with them."

Fen Yu gasped. "Cruel!"

Wei Rong burst into laughter, rolling in the air. "I told you not to tease her before tea!"

Yun'er looked at them all, confused as always when the Empress argued with air. But she had long since learned not to question it.

By the time she finished her breakfast, the irritation had faded into a weary amusement. Her ghosts were still chatting — louder now, playful, childish, and completely unconcerned with the reality of royal duties.

Fen Yu perched near her shoulder. "You'll see, Your Majesty. The moment that handsome emperor smiles at you, you'll forget all about your swollen knees."

Wei Rong added smugly, "If he offers you a hand to step down from the dais, don't glare at him too hard. Smile a little."

Li Shen nodded thoughtfully. "A diplomatic smile. The kind that wins alliances."

Lian An groaned softly, pressing her palm against her forehead. "Enough. One more word about this emperor, and I'll summon the temple priest to perform a three-day purification ritual right here."

The ghosts gasped in unison, retreating a few paces.

Fen Yu whispered, "She doesn't mean it, right?"

Wei Rong muttered, "She might."

Li Shen sighed. "We'll be quiet."

For five full seconds, silence reigned. Then Fen Yu couldn't resist. "But what if he's even taller than your husband—"

"Out," Lian An said firmly.

The ghosts vanished with a rush of faint laughter, leaving her alone with her breakfast and her exasperation.

She looked down at her half-empty bowl, shook her head, and muttered under her breath, "Uncultured man, annoying ghosts, and swollen knees — what a perfect morning."

Then, calmly, she picked up her spoon again and kept eating.

Outside, the palace bells rang to announce the approach of noon, and somewhere in the corridor, servants hurried to prepare her for the ceremony she had never wanted to attend.

Inside the chamber, the Empress of the empire sat surrounded by invisible chatter and the faint scent of lotus porridge — a woman too tired to argue, too proud to refuse, and too amused to break.

And even as she finished her last bite, the faint whisper of ghostly voices floated back through the air:

"You'll definitely have a crush on him."

"You'll see."

"You'll like him."

Lian An sighed, staring at the ceiling. "Heaven save me from ghosts with romantic fantasies."