

Ghost 90

Chapter 90: breakfast

The soft morning light spilled through the silk curtains, spreading a gentle glow across Empress Lian An's chamber. The scent of sandalwood lingered faintly, mingling with the cool breeze drifting in from the courtyard.

For once, the palace was calm. No summons. No lectures. No accusations. Only peace—brief, fragile peace.

Lian An stretched lazily, her back cracking slightly from the strain of the past few days. As she glanced across the room, her eyes fell on the corner where her three ghost companions hung limply, still tied to the large porcelain vase with the red silk rope from the night before.

What she saw next nearly made her choke on her laughter.

All three were fast asleep—mouths open, heads lolling to one side like children after a sugar crash. Fen Yu was drooling transparent ghostly mist, Wei Rong's snoring sounded like faint wind rustling through leaves, and Li Shen muttered something in his sleep about "stolen pastries."

Lian An pressed a hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking as she tried to hold back her laughter.

"Oh heavens," she whispered. "You three look like drowned chickens."

The scene was so ridiculous she had to sit down. All her anger from the previous day—gone. Instead, only amusement and faint affection remained.

She leaned her chin on her hand, watching them drool and snore. "It's good they got a lesson," she murmured softly. "If I don't discipline them, they'll loot the entire palace next time."

Her maid, Yun'er, entered quietly with a basin of water. Seeing her mistress smiling at the tied ghosts, she froze, unsure if she should speak. "Your Majesty...?"

"Nothing," Lian An said quickly, straightening. "Just thinking about what to do today."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Yun'er said, bowing.

A Plan for the Morning

After washing and freshening up, Lian An looked out the window toward the palace gardens. The day was warm and bright, the sound of birds echoing faintly in the distance.

She sighed softly. "I should do something useful today."

Her stomach growled faintly, reminding her she hadn't eaten yet. But her gaze turned again to the three ghosts still tied in the corner, drooling in their sleep. A small smile touched her lips.

"Maybe I should cook," she mused aloud. "For them. And for Princess Zhi."

Yun'er blinked in surprise. "For Princess Zhi, Your Majesty?"

Lian An nodded. "Yes. She's been kind. And I heard the Dowager wasn't pleased with me yesterday after that... incident with the visiting Emperor."

Her expression soured slightly at the memory—the foreign Emperor kissing her hand before everyone. Though unintended, it had caused quite the stir.

"I don't want the Dowager thinking I've forgotten my place," Lian An muttered. "If I send her food, it will look respectful. And Princess Zhi will appreciate something light and nourishing for her health."

She stood up, determination flickering in her eyes. "Prepare the kitchen. I'll cook myself."

Yun'er's eyes widened. "Your Majesty? You're going to cook again? After everything you went through—"

Lian An waved a hand dismissively. "I'm fine now. Besides, no one else can handle ghost appetites like mine."

Into the Kitchen

The imperial kitchen buzzed with servants preparing breakfast for the court. When Lian An arrived, they immediately fell to their knees, startled.

"Your Majesty! You shouldn't trouble yourself—"

"It's not trouble," Lian An interrupted, smiling. "Just move aside and give me some space."

The servants exchanged nervous glances but quickly obeyed.

She rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

First, for the ghosts, she decided on something rich and aromatic—a lavish breakfast that could please even ethereal taste buds. She began preparing lotus-seed rice porridge with honey, crispy sweet lotus chips, steamed red bean buns, and delicate jade dumplings filled with spirit herbs that ghostly forms could actually absorb.

The air filled with the aroma of roasted sesame, light spices, and steamed dough. Even the palace cooks stopped to watch in awe; the Empress's culinary skill had become legendary among the servants.

Then she moved on to the Princess Zhi's meal—a lighter spread of soft millet porridge simmered with jujubes, tender chicken soup with goji berries, and steamed peach cakes for sweetness.

"This should help her energy without overwhelming her," Lian An murmured, carefully arranging the dishes.

Finally, she prepared a small tray for the Dowager: classic imperial dishes—steamed river fish with ginger, jasmine-scented rice, and lotus soup. Every flavor carefully balanced, every presentation flawless.

When the last dish was done, she wiped her hands, satisfied.

"Yun'er," she said, "send this tray to the Dowager with my greetings. Tell her I wish her continued health."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And this one—give it to Princess Zhi's maid. Tell her it's from me."

Yun'er bowed and hurried away with both trays.

A Moment of Peace

Once the trays were sent, Lian An exhaled deeply, feeling a rare sense of calm.

She turned to her second maid. "Set a small table here. I'll eat quietly."

The maid obeyed, setting up a low wooden table near the window. Steam rose from her own bowl of noodles and tea as she sat down, savoring the first peaceful morning in days.

But her peace didn't last long.

From behind her came a faint, ghostly snore.

She glanced over her shoulder at the corner. All three ghosts were still tied up, mouths hanging open, drool floating in little misty bubbles.

Her eyebrow twitched.

She picked up a thin wooden stick from the table—one she used for stirring soup—and walked over silently.

Then she jabbed Fen Yu's side with the tip.

"Wake up," she said dryly.

The ghost flailed mid-air. "Who's attacking me?!"

She jabbed Wei Rong next.

He shrieked, "Assassin! I'll haunt your grandchildren!"

Finally, she poked Li Shen, who opened one bleary eye and muttered, "I told you not to steal the jade brush again..."

Lian An crossed her arms. "Are you all quite finished?"

They blinked at her, disoriented—then remembered exactly what had happened the previous night.

Their faces fell in unison.

Fen Yu looked away guiltily. Wei Rong pouted. Li Shen sighed in resignation.

"Mistress," Fen Yu started hesitantly, "we were wrong. We promise never to—"

Lian An held up a hand. "Save it. I already forgave you."

They all froze.

"What?" Wei Rong said suspiciously. "No more punishments?"

"No," she said, trying not to smile. "But you have to earn your breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Fen Yu's voice brightened immediately. "You made food?"

"I did," she said. "And if you behave, you can have some."

In an instant, the ghosts perked up like children hearing the word "candy."

"Really?" Fen Yu beamed.

"After starving all night?" Wei Rong said dramatically. "Truly, she's the kindest mistress alive—or dead."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "I knew she'd soften."

Lian An rolled her eyes. "We'll see if you still think that after cleaning the table."

The ghosts didn't need to be told twice. In seconds, the red silk ropes untangled with a flick of her fingers, and the three of them zipped toward the dining table with hungry eyes.

Breakfast for the Hungry Souls

When she uncovered the dishes, the aroma filled the room—sweet, savory, perfectly balanced.

Fen Yu nearly cried. "Lotus chips!"

Wei Rong gasped. "Steamed buns! Oh, blessed heavens!"

Li Shen inhaled deeply. "You've outdone yourself, Mistress."

They didn't wait for permission; they dove in like starving spirits, shoveling dumplings and buns with unholy enthusiasm.

Lian An sat back, sipping her tea with a faint smirk. Watching them eat with glowing faces and content sighs filled her with quiet amusement.

Maybe, she thought, they weren't such a curse after all.

"Slow down before you choke," she said dryly. "You're already dead, don't make me hold a ghost funeral too."

Fen Yu laughed through a mouthful of bun. "Your food could revive even the dead, Mistress!"

Wei Rong mumbled, "If I'd eaten like this alive, I'd never have died single."

Li Shen added, "If we had a restaurant again, it would make you richer than the Emperor himself."

Lian An smiled faintly, remembering her little dream of opening more restaurants one day. "Maybe," she said softly. "Maybe I will."

When the table was nearly empty and her own meal finished, she looked at the three ghosts—still licking their plates clean, humming happily.

"See?" she said, voice calm. "You don't need to steal to have nice things. Just behave and work with me."

They nodded vigorously, mouths full.

"Yes, Mistress!"

"We swear!"

"Never again!"

She leaned back, content. "Good. Because if I find one more stolen sword or comb in this room—"

"We'll return ourselves to the afterlife," Wei Rong interrupted quickly.

Fen Yu saluted. "Scout's honor!"

Lian An chuckled softly. "Good. Now clean the dishes. I'll take a nap."

"Yes, Mistress!"

As she lay back on her couch, the three ghosts bustled around, humming tunelessly as they cleared the table.

For the first time in many days, the Empress smiled — genuinely, freely. The palace might be cold, its people treacherous, but in her small world, warmth still existed — even if it came from three troublesome, loyal ghosts and a steaming bowl of homemade food.