

Ghost 91

Chapter 91: breakfast

Morning light bathed the Hall of Tranquil Grace in soft gold. The first sunlight touched the painted eaves, shimmering across silk curtains embroidered with cranes and plum blossoms. The smell of sandalwood and chrysanthemum tea filled the air, drifting lazily around the high room.

Seated at the center table, regal as a statue, was Empress Dowager Ronghua. Her posture was upright despite her age, her silver hair coiled perfectly beneath a golden phoenix crown. The years had etched lines across her face, but her eyes—sharp, cold, calculating—remained unclouded.

Across from her sat Lady Chen, the Emperor's favored concubine, in pale rose robes with a jade hairpin glinting at her temple. She poured tea with graceful movements, her tone soft and honeyed. "Your Majesty, you seem in better spirits today. Did you rest well?"

The Dowager took a measured sip, her gaze fixed on the rising steam. "As well as one can rest in a palace full of restless hearts."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze obediently, though the corner of her lips curved faintly. She had learned long ago that the Dowager preferred subtle flattery over bold words.

Just then, a maid entered the hall, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty, a tray has arrived from the Empress. She said it is prepared especially for Your Majesty's health—to strengthen and nourish your body."

The Dowager's brows lifted in surprise. "The Empress sent food?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The maid held the tray out carefully. Steam rose from beneath the covered dishes—gentle, fragrant, warm.

Lady Chen hid her curiosity behind a small smile. "Her Majesty must still be thinking of Your Majesty's health."

The Dowager's expression softened slightly. "Hmm. That girl..." she murmured. "She always did have some talent for cooking. Even when I was furious with her, the dishes she sent tasted better than half the royal kitchen's work."

The maid knelt and uncovered the tray. Immediately, the delicate fragrance of lotus and ginseng filled the air. The soup shimmered faintly gold beneath the sunlight.

The Dowager inhaled deeply, her eyes lighting up despite herself. "Set it on the table."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The dishes were arranged perfectly: steamed jasmine rice, lotus root soup, jujube cakes glazed with honey, and a cup of warm goji tea. The sight alone stirred hunger, even in the old Dowager who rarely found appetite these days.

Lady Chen's gaze lingered on the dishes longer than necessary. So she can cook like this too, she thought bitterly. No wonder the Emperor's mother still tolerates her.

The Dowager lifted the spoon, took a mouthful of soup, and sighed softly. The taste was exactly as she remembered—mild, nourishing, comforting. Each sip felt like warmth spreading through her body.

"This is quite good," she said finally, setting down the spoon. "At least she's good for something."

Lady Chen smiled faintly, echoing politely, "Her Majesty's skill is indeed... remarkable."

The Dowager chuckled humorlessly. "Remarkable? She's better suited for the kitchens than for the throne. Hmph. That girl's mouth and temper are sharper than a soldier's blade. A pity such a fine cook was born with no sense of obedience."

Her chopsticks tapped lightly against the bowl as her voice cooled. "Tell me, Lady Chen, do you know why I dislike her?"

Lady Chen shook her head delicately. "This servant does not dare to assume."

"Because she is too proud," the Dowager said. "Too sure of her own worth. Her family, the Lians, are already powerful. The Duke commands half the northern army. If her influence in the palace grows, it will be their dynasty, not ours."

Lady Chen's eyes flickered, a spark of intrigue glinting beneath her lashes.

The Dowager continued, her tone low, measured, deliberate. "I will not allow that. The throne belongs to the Chen bloodline. My son sits upon it now, and one day—" she gave a small, meaningful smile "—his child must inherit it."

Lady Chen's pulse quickened, though she kept her head bowed.

The Dowager's eyes softened as she looked at her. "You are intelligent, gentle, graceful. You do not speak unnecessarily. The Emperor finds comfort in such presence. If you conceive, the throne will be secure. Remember that."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze, pretending modesty, though her fingers tightened in her lap.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You must try harder," the Dowager went on, oblivious to the flicker of triumph in Lady Chen's eyes. "The Emperor listens to me but does not act swiftly. Perhaps he fears the ministers' tongues. But time is short. He must have an heir soon."

Lady Chen hesitated, then asked carefully, "Your Majesty, does His Majesty truly... not visit the Empress's chambers?"

The Dowager smirked faintly. "Not once. Since their marriage, he has never spent a full night there. I raised that boy. I know his heart. He despises disobedience, and that girl is nothing but defiance wrapped in silk."

Lady Chen almost dropped her cup in shock. So it's true... they've never consummated their marriage!

Her pulse thundered with excitement she dared not show.

The Dowager continued, eyes gleaming. "He avoids her like plague. If you play your role wisely, child, you will become the true heart of this palace. The rest will only follow."

Lady Chen bowed deeply, hiding the satisfaction that bloomed across her heart.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will not disappoint you."

The Dowager nodded approvingly. "Good. Then remember this: as long as I live, the Lian family's daughter will never sit securely on that throne."

Her voice hardened. "I warned the Emperor—if he dares let her bear a child, I will never acknowledge it as heir. I would rather raise a stranger's son than hers."

Lady Chen looked up, eyes wide with feigned shock. "Your Majesty, surely—"

The Dowager cut her off. "This empire was built with Chen blood. It will not fall into another family's grasp."

She reached for her cup again, sipping her tea calmly. The contrast between her serene face and venomous words made Lady Chen's stomach twist with equal awe and fear.

After a moment, the Dowager sighed, leaning back slightly. "This soup is exquisite. Even when I try to despise her, my body refuses."

Lady Chen forced a small laugh. "Perhaps the Empress was meant to heal through her food."

"She should heal her manners instead," the Dowager said dryly. "But yes... perhaps she is good for something other than causing scandals."

She gave Lady Chen another bowl. "Here, eat more. The girl's efforts need not be wasted entirely."

Lady Chen accepted it obediently, but her mind was far from calm. So that's it, she thought, tasting the soup with quiet satisfaction. The Emperor never touched her. Then the throne isn't sealed yet. I still have time.

Her thoughts darkened as she lowered her spoon. And as for that slap... one day, I'll make sure she kneels before me and begs for mercy.

The Dowager finished her bowl, her mood lightened by the meal. "At least the day begins with good taste," she said, smiling faintly. "Tell the maid to return my thanks. Let her think her effort earned forgiveness."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lady Chen said sweetly.

In the Princess's Quarters

Across the palace, soft sunlight fell upon Princess Zhi's residence, illuminating the patterned screens and quiet halls. The scent of herbs and honey drifted through the room.

Princess Zhi lay half-reclined on her couch, her face pale, a sheen of sweat on her brow. Her maid, Mei'er, fanned her gently while murmuring, "Your Highness should try to eat something soon. The physician warned you mustn't starve."

Zhi groaned softly. "Everything tastes bitter. Even water smells strange. I can't keep anything down."

Her voice trembled slightly; fatigue and loneliness seeped into every word. Her husband had not visited in three nights. The rumors whispered among her servants said he was spending time with the daughter of a minor court minister.

Just then, another maid entered the room, carrying a covered tray. "Your Highness, the Empress has sent food again. She said it's prepared with care—something gentle for your condition."

Zhi's head lifted slightly. "The Empress?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

The maid placed the tray before her. When the lid lifted, the air filled with the comforting scent of millet porridge simmered with lotus seeds, light chicken broth, and sweet peach cakes.

The princess blinked in surprise. "It smells... lovely."

Her maid smiled encouragingly. "Try it, Your Highness."

With cautious hands, Zhi took a spoonful. The taste was warm, subtle, not overwhelming. The sweetness was faint but satisfying; the texture smooth.

She paused, savoring it, then took another bite. And another.

"This is—good," she said softly, her voice trembling with something close to relief. "I haven't eaten like this in weeks."

Her maid's face lit up. "The Empress is very thoughtful. She must know your health needs gentle care."

Zhi nodded slowly. "Yes... she always was kind to me."

Her voice softened as she looked toward the window, sunlight brushing her face. "In this entire palace, she's the only one who doesn't treat kindness like a weapon."

The maid said quietly, "Shall I send a message of thanks, Your Highness?"

Princess Zhi smiled faintly. "No need. I'll go myself. I'll visit her this evening."

She leaned back against the couch, hand resting gently over her stomach. For the first time in many days, warmth spread through her chest—not from medicine, but from genuine affection.

"She must be lonely," Zhi murmured, half to herself. "Everyone envies her crown, but no one sees how much it weighs."

Her maid bowed silently, not daring to comment.

Outside, the wind rustled through the plum trees, carrying the distant sound of bells. Somewhere beyond the garden walls, schemes brewed and alliances shifted—but within this small chamber, peace, however brief, lingered like the aftertaste of warm tea.

Two Paths, One Thread

As the sun rose higher, the palace resumed its rhythm—maids bustling, ministers gossiping, soldiers marching through the courtyard.

In one wing, the Dowager plotted over a bowl of soup; in another, Lady Chen nurtured ambitions behind soft smiles; and far away, Princess Zhi silently prayed for the Empress's safety.

Meanwhile, Empress Lian An, unaware of how her simple act of kindness had stirred so many hearts, sat in her quiet chamber with a faint smile, surrounded by three mischievous ghosts fighting over the last dumpling.

"See?" Fen Yu said smugly. "Good deeds always make good gossip."

Wei Rong snorted. "Or good enemies."

Li Shen sighed. "Either way, Mistress, breakfast is working."

Lian An just laughed softly, unaware that the ripples she'd set in motion that morning were spreading fast — from one heart to another, threading kindness through a palace made of whispers and daggers.