

Ghost 92

Chapter 92: banquet whisper

The sky had turned a deep, honey-colored gold by the time the sun began its slow descent behind the palace walls. Servants lit the lanterns one by one along the curved walkways, and the faint hum of cicadas carried through the still evening air.

Inside the Empress's quarters, the scent of jasmine tea drifted softly through the room, mingled with something less pleasant—raised voices.

"Fen Yu!" came Empress Lian An's sharp tone from within. "If I see one more hairpin missing, I will personally banish all three of you to the ancestral hall!"

From inside came the sound of things clattering and muffled whines. "We didn't steal, Mistress! We only borrowed!" cried the first ghost, her voice echoing faintly from the far wall.

"Borrowed? Borrowed from my jewelry box?" Lian An snapped, glaring toward the corner where a faint shimmer of light betrayed the presence of her mischievous companions.

"You said yesterday we could touch shiny things!" protested Wei Rong indignantly, his ghostly figure flickering like candlelight.

"I meant the teapot, you fool!" Lian An threw up her hands, exasperated.

At that moment, her maid hurried into the room, panting slightly. "Your Majesty—Princess Zhi is here to see you!"

Lian An froze, her irritation vanishing at once. "Zhi'er?" she repeated, startled. "Now?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. She's waiting outside."

Before she could say anything else, Princess Zhi's soft voice came from behind the screen, full of warmth and sweetness. "May I come in, Sister?"

The Empress's expression softened immediately. She straightened her robe, smoothed her sleeves, and stepped forward.

"Come in!" she called.

Princess Zhi entered with her maid following closely behind, holding a small basket covered in silk cloth. The princess looked radiant despite her delicate complexion—her cheeks glowed faintly from the short walk, and her eyes sparkled when she saw Lian An.

"Sister!" she said happily. "I came to thank you in person. Your food helped me so much. I haven't been able to eat properly for weeks, and after I ate what you sent, I actually slept through the night without nausea."

Lian An's eyes warmed. "That's wonderful news." She took her hand fondly and pulled her closer, giving her a light embrace. "You don't need to thank me, Zhi'er. You're family. Taking care of you makes me happy."

The princess smiled shyly, squeezing her hand. "Still, I wanted to bring you something. These are fruits and herbs sent by my father from our family's farm. They're freshly harvested—see, the peaches are so ripe they almost glow."

Her maid carefully placed the basket on the table. The smell of fresh fruit filled the room—sweet, earthy, comforting.

"They're beautiful," the Empress said with genuine delight. "Tell your father I'm grateful. His farm always produces the best crops."

The two women sat down together, and Lian An herself poured tea for both of them. "Come, drink with me. It's been too long since I've had a proper talk with someone who isn't trying to manipulate me or make me copy scriptures."

Princess Zhi giggled softly. "You sound like my grandmother when she's forced to attend a court ceremony."

Lian An chuckled, setting down the teapot. "I'm serious. You're one of the few people in this palace who reminds me what kindness looks like."

Zhi blushed slightly and took a sip. The tea was warm, lightly fragrant with osmanthus.

For a while, the two talked casually—of food, flowers, and gossip too harmless to reach the Dowager's ears. Then, as expected, conversation drifted to the most popular topic in the palace these days.

Zhi leaned forward, whispering conspiratorially. "Sister, did you see the Emperor from the Eastern Kingdom today? Everyone in my courtyard can't stop talking about him!"

Lian An laughed softly. "You mean that handsome young Emperor who made even the palace guards forget their duty for a moment?"

"Yes!" Zhi's eyes sparkled mischievously. "They say when he smiled, even the court ministers forgot their vows. Half the maids have already decided they'll marry him in their next life!"

Lian An smiled faintly, remembering how the foreign Emperor had taken her hand earlier in greeting—and how her own Emperor had immediately coughed like thunder. "He certainly knows how to draw attention," she admitted, half amused, half annoyed.

Princess Zhi leaned forward eagerly. "Well, you certainly drew his attention too. He didn't stop staring at you for half the ceremony."

The Empress groaned softly, pressing her temple. "Don't remind me. The last thing I need is more gossip. If the Dowager hears about it, she'll make me kneel again for 'enchanted foreign royalty.'"

They both laughed quietly, the sound of two women who understood too well how sharp palace tongues could be.

After a moment, Zhi lowered her voice again. "Sister, in two days, there's going to be a grand banquet. It's to celebrate the Eastern Emperor's visit and the alliance between the kingdoms. There'll be dancers, performers, and the ritual of shared swords."

Lian An nodded slowly. "Yes, I heard whispers. The Emperor hasn't told me anything directly, but I assumed as much."

Zhi smiled. "Then you must attend in style. Everyone's eyes will be on you, Sister. You should prepare a gown that matches your grace."

The Empress smiled faintly, tapping her teacup. "Hmm... you're right. I'll need to prepare something suitable. Maybe a silk in jade blue with silver embroidery..."

In her mind, she was already picturing the patterns, the subtle jewelry, the arrangement of her hair. Something elegant, something that reminded people she was not to be overshadowed—no matter what schemes the Dowager or Lady Chen planned.

While the two women chatted comfortably, laughter echoing softly in the room, neither of them noticed a faint shimmer by the fruit basket.

The lid wobbled slightly. Then, one by one, peaches began to rise into the air.

At first, Princess Zhi's maid didn't notice. But when a particularly large pear floated up, spun once, and vanished midair with a muffled crunching sound, her eyes widened in horror.

"Your Highness!" she squeaked, pointing a trembling finger at the table. "The fruits—they're flying!"

Zhi blinked, startled. "What?"

"Look! The peaches—they just—just vanished!" The maid's face had gone pale as rice paper.

Lian An froze, her smile stiffening as realization dawned. Slowly, she turned her head toward the corner where three invisible figures were clearly enjoying themselves far too much.

A faint crunch echoed again.

She forced a calm smile, though her temple twitched. "Ah... it's probably the light. Or perhaps you haven't rested well lately?"

The maid stammered, "B-but, Your Majesty, I clearly saw—"

Zhi interrupted gently, giving her maid a look. "You've been working too hard, Lan'er. You're overtired. When one hasn't slept properly, the mind plays tricks. Go rest after this."

The maid hesitated but bowed quickly, murmuring apologies.

Zhi turned back to the Empress and smiled, though her eyes flickered with faint amusement. "Sister, perhaps your room has fairies. They seem to like your food too much."

Lian An nearly choked on her tea.

When Zhi rose to leave a little while later, she squeezed Lian An's hand warmly. "Thank you again for everything. I'll come visit again soon—with more fruits, perhaps."

"Please do," Lian An said, still smiling, though her eye twitched dangerously. "And rest well, Zhi'er. Don't worry about anything."

After the princess and her maid left, silence filled the room.

Then, very slowly, Lian An turned her gaze toward the empty fruit basket. "Come out," she said evenly.

Nothing.

"I said—come out."

Three shimmering shapes appeared immediately. The ghosts hovered guiltily, faces pale and eyes wide.

Fen Yu gave a nervous laugh. "Ah, Mistress, you see, the fruits were calling our names—"

"The fruits were calling you?" Lian An's tone was dangerously calm. "So you decided to make them disappear in front of a living human?"

Wei Rong scratched the back of his head. "We were... testing her reflexes."

Lian An's expression turned colder than winter snow. "Reflexes."

Li Shen, ever the calmest, tried to speak. "We meant no harm. It's just—your cooking makes us hungry, and the fruits looked lonely—"

"Enough."

Her voice cut through the air like a blade. The ghosts froze.

"I told you before," she said, standing, "no foolish tricks when others are present. Do you want the entire palace to know you exist?"

They shook their heads quickly.

"Good," she said sharply. "Then you can spend the night making yourselves useful."

They looked at one another nervously.

"You will clean my wardrobe," Lian An announced, crossing her arms.

Fen Yu's jaw dropped. "What? That—thing—hasn't been opened in months!"

"Then consider this redemption," she said with a cool smile. "Everything in order. Color by color, fabric by fabric. If I find a single robe wrinkled, none of you will get a single dumpling tomorrow."

The ghosts groaned in unison.

"No food?" Wei Rong looked devastated. "But Mistress—"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

They didn't dare answer.

Grumbling miserably, the three floated toward the wardrobe. The moment they opened it, they froze in horror.

Inside was chaos—silks tangled like vines, jewelry scattered, ribbons knotted into unholy shapes. It looked less like a royal wardrobe and more like a battlefield.

Fen Yu groaned. "We're doomed."

Wei Rong muttered, "I'd rather haunt the Dowager's hall than clean this mess."

"Start with the left side," Lian An ordered, sitting down with her teacup, watching them like a satisfied warden.

As the ghosts worked, bickering quietly, Lian An allowed herself a small, exhausted laugh.

The day had been long, full of interruptions, but at least laughter still existed within her walls. Somewhere deep inside, she felt a tiny flicker of peace.

For now, that was enough.

Outside, the moon rose high, bathing the quiet palace in pale silver. Inside, a scowling Empress, three sulking ghosts, and one freshly folded robe marked the end of another day in a kingdom that never stopped whispering.