

Ghost 93

Chapter 93: the palace lively

Every corridor shimmered with new silk banners; every servant rushed past with trays, flowers, and decorations. The faint clang of bronze gongs echoed through the halls as attendants rehearsed the welcoming ceremony. The scent of lotus and burning incense drifted on the breeze — all preparation for the grand banquet to welcome the Eastern Empire's Emperor and his delegation.

By late afternoon, even the gardens seemed to hum with excitement. Palace maids could be seen trimming hedges, hanging lanterns from every arch, and polishing the marble walkways until they gleamed.

Inside her chambers, Empress Lian An sat by the mirror, watching the bustle outside through her window.

The past few days had been full of exhaustion — endless planning, fittings for new gowns, and the polite emptiness of political smiles. She had overseen most of the arrangements personally, even though her knees still throbbed faintly from her recent punishment.

Now that the preparations were nearly complete, she allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

Her maids had just finished adjusting her evening robe and left her alone to rest. Nearby, the three ghostly companions — Fen Yu, Wei Rong, and Li Shen — were sprawled in midair, half asleep, faintly snoring.

Lian An smiled faintly when she looked at them. Their translucent forms drifted lazily around the room like tired clouds.

"They actually did it," she murmured softly, glancing toward her wardrobe.

The once chaotic space was now spotless — every silk gown neatly folded, every sash untangled, jewelry gleaming in perfect rows. It looked so orderly that even the palace maids had gasped when they'd seen it that morning.

Lian An chuckled quietly to herself. "They deserved that punishment. Flying fruits in front of living people—what were they thinking?"

Her gaze softened as she looked around the quiet room. "Still... they worked hard. They've earned their rest."

She stretched her arms and rose from her seat, deciding that a walk might clear her thoughts. After being confined for so long — first by illness, then by punishment — she longed for open air, even if just for a short while.

She slipped on a light outer robe, told her maid she would only go to the garden, and stepped outside.

The Evening Walk

The sky was painted with amber streaks fading into violet. Crickets had begun their evening song, and the faint sound of temple bells carried from afar.

The garden behind her quarters was peaceful — lanterns swayed gently among blooming chrysanthemums, and koi rippled the surface of the pond as they chased drifting petals.

Lian An walked slowly along the stone path, savoring the scent of earth and fresh flowers. Her body was still weak, but the simple act of moving freely soothed her mind.

"Finally," she murmured, smiling faintly, "a moment of peace."

Her thoughts wandered as she strolled. She thought of her maids, who worked tirelessly from dawn till night without complaint. She thought of Princess Zhi's kind heart and her innocent gratitude.

And inevitably, her thoughts strayed to the Emperor.

A sigh escaped her lips before she could stop it. "So proud, so stubborn," she whispered. "He punishes without thinking, speaks without understanding..."

But then, a faint memory flickered — of how he'd helped her stand during the welcoming ceremony when her legs had trembled, how he'd shielded her from the eyes of the court.

Her expression softened just a little.

"Even so..." she muttered, "his heart is colder than winter."

As she reached a quiet corner of the garden, something broke the stillness — a faint, trembling sound.

"Meow..."

She paused, blinking.

"Meow..."

It came again, weak but insistent, from somewhere near the rose bushes.

Curious, she followed the sound. Parting the low branches, she gasped softly.

There, hidden beneath the shadow of the shrub, were two tiny kittens — one pure white like freshly fallen snow, the other a soft silver-gray. Their small bodies were trembling, their eyes wide and wet.

"Oh..." Lian An knelt carefully, her heart melting. "You poor things."

The kittens mewed again, their voices pitiful. She glanced around for the mother, frowning. After a moment, she saw the limp form of an older cat nearby, motionless in the grass.

Lian An's breath caught.

"Oh no..." she whispered, her voice soft with sorrow. "Their mother's gone."

She knelt fully, brushing dirt aside with her hands. The small creature had likely died protecting its young. Something in her chest tightened.

"They're orphans now," she murmured, gently stroking the kittens' heads. "Just like me in this palace."

She looked at the tiny lives pressed against her palm, helpless and shivering.

"I can't leave you here," she whispered. "If I don't take you in, someone will throw you out tomorrow."

The kittens mewed again, curling closer to her warmth.

She made her decision. "Then it's settled. You'll stay with me. I'll raise you secretly."

But first — she turned her gaze to the still form of the mother — "Let's give her peace."

She looked around for a stick, but finding none, began to dig the soil with her own hands. The dirt was cold and rough; it caught under her nails and reddened her palms. Still, she worked carefully, reverently.

Her hands ached, but she didn't stop. "You protected them well," she whispered softly. "Now rest."

The Emperor's Distraction

Elsewhere in the same garden, Emperor Rong Zhen was walking with two of his senior ministers. Their low voices drifted between matters of border security and troop movements.

He listened — at least, he pretended to.

But his eyes kept straying toward the path ahead, where the fading sunlight glowed softly between the trees. Something there caught his attention.

At first, it was only a shape — a figure kneeling in the garden, her hair glinting faintly gold in the light.

He blinked, distracted, barely hearing the minister beside him.

"...and regarding the new alliance treaty, Your Majesty—"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted absently, still staring. "We'll... discuss that tomorrow."

The ministers exchanged confused glances as he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "That will be all for now. Leave me."

They bowed deeply and withdrew, leaving him alone in the evening quiet.

Rong Zhen stepped forward, curiosity overtaking him.

As he drew closer, his brows furrowed. The figure — the woman — was sitting on the ground, sleeves rolled up, digging the dirt with her bare hands. Her hair had come loose, a few strands falling across her flushed cheeks.

It took only a moment to recognize her.

"Lian An," he murmured, stunned.

He approached silently, watching her small, delicate hands scoop earth again and again, the skin scratched and reddened.

His chest tightened unexpectedly.

"What is she doing?" he muttered under his breath.

When he finally stepped forward, his shadow fell across her.

Lian An startled, spinning around. "Who—?"

Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Y-Your Majesty?"

He frowned, taking in her dirt-stained hands and disheveled appearance. "What are you doing out here alone? Where are your servants?"

"I sent them away," she said quickly, brushing dirt from her robe. "I don't need them for this."

"For what?" he demanded. "Why are your hands like this? You're hurting yourself."

"I'm fine," she said, standing abruptly. "It's just—"

Before she could finish, he reached out and took her hand. His fingers closed gently around her wrist, lifting her palm toward the light. The sight of her reddened skin made his expression harden.

"Foolish woman," he muttered. "You'll tear your hands apart doing this."

Lian An flushed, tugging her hand back. "Don't call me that. I'm burying a cat."

He blinked. "...A cat?"

She nodded toward the small mound beside her. "The mother died. There are two kittens left. I didn't want them to see her body like that."

For a long moment, he simply stared at her — at the dirt on her robe, the softness in her eyes, the quiet dignity in her messy, unguarded state.

Something inside him shifted.

"You could've asked for help," he said quietly.

"I don't need help," she replied softly but firmly. "Not for something like this."

He opened his mouth to argue, then stopped.

The sight before him — her kneeling in the twilight, small hands trembling yet determined — struck something he couldn't explain.

He knelt beside her without another word.

"What—what are you doing?" she asked, startled.

"I said I'd help," he replied simply. "Move aside."

She blinked in disbelief as he removed his own gloves, set them down, and began scooping earth with his bare hands. His long fingers, always used to scrolls and swords, now worked gently beside hers.

The silence between them deepened — not awkward, but strangely peaceful. The air smelled of fresh soil and flowers. The only sound was the soft rustle of their sleeves.

After a while, Lian An whispered, "You'll ruin your hands."

He gave a quiet laugh. "Then we'll both be ruined."

She looked at him — really looked — and for the first time in a long while, she saw no crown, no power, no pride. Just a man helping her bury a stray cat under the fading moonlight.

When they finished, the small grave lay beneath a blooming osmanthus tree. Lian An pressed her palms together in a brief prayer.

"Rest well," she murmured.

Rong Zhen stood silently beside her, then looked down at the two tiny kittens in the basket nearby. They blinked up at him with round, trusting eyes.

"You're taking them in?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Secretly, of course. They'll stay in my chamber."

He gave a faint smile. "You're impossible."

She arched a brow. "And you're interfering."

Their eyes met for a brief, charged moment — then both looked away.

The moon hung above them, silver and soft.

Lian An turned to leave, gathering the kittens carefully in her arms. But before she could walk away, he said quietly, "You shouldn't be out alone again. Not in this state."

She hesitated. "Are you... worried?"

He didn't answer. He only looked at her — long, steady, unreadable — before murmuring, "Your hands are too delicate for dirt."

Then he turned and walked away, his figure disappearing into the shadowed path.

Lian An stared after him, her heart strangely unsteady.

She looked down at the two kittens curled against her chest and whispered with a small smile, "What an odd man your new master is."

The kittens purred softly in reply.

And in the quiet garden, beneath the osmanthus tree, a grave of a mother cat rested under moonlight — a small testament to the strange, human tenderness hidden within the palace of cold hearts.