

## Ghost 94

### Chapter 94: the milk

The morning sunlight poured gently through the lattice windows, painting golden squares across the Empress's chambers. The air smelled faintly of flowers from the inner courtyard and the soft milk fragrance that clung to her robe.

Lian An sat cross-legged on a low stool, her sleeves rolled up and her hair tied loosely with a silk ribbon. In front of her, on a folded towel, two tiny kittens squirmed restlessly — one white as snow, the other a faint gray with darker paws. Their eyes were bright now, no longer dull with fear.

"Hold still, little ones," she murmured, smiling faintly. "If you move again, you'll both fall into the tub."

She gestured to her maid. "Bring the warm water, not too hot. And the soft towel too."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

A few moments later, the maid returned, carrying a wooden basin filled with warm water that steamed gently in the cool air. The Empress dipped her fingers in first to test it, then nodded in approval.

"Perfect."

The kittens mewed softly, their small tails curling. Lian An laughed quietly and reached for the white one first. It fit perfectly in her hands, light and trembling.

"All right, brave one," she whispered, lowering it carefully into the basin.

The kitten wriggled for a moment, then relaxed as her fingers worked gently through its fur. She scrubbed softly, removing dirt and dust, the water turning faintly gray. The other kitten watched anxiously from the towel, mewing in protest.

"Your turn next," she teased. "Don't act like I'm boiling you alive."

When both kittens were clean, she lifted them out one by one, wrapping them in a towel. The white one sneezed, earning a gentle chuckle from her.

"Poor things... you've been through enough," she murmured, drying them gently. "From now on, you're palace kittens. You'll never starve again."

Her maid smiled softly. "Your Majesty has such a kind heart. Even animals are lucky to meet you."

"Shh," Lian An said quietly. "No one must know. If the Dowager hears I'm raising cats in the palace, she'll have another reason to scold me."

The maid nodded quickly, sealing her lips.

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Elsewhere — The Emperor's Courtyard

While the Empress tended to her small new companions, Emperor Rong Zhen had just returned to his own courtyard.

Every servant froze the moment he entered.

His hair was slightly disheveled. His robe, normally pristine, had dirt stains on the cuffs and a faint smudge across his sleeve. But what shocked them most were his hands — bare, scratched, and covered in traces of soil.

The palace had seen him in every state — armored, wounded, even bleeding from battle. But never dirty.

"Your Majesty..." the head eunuch stammered, eyes wide. "Shall I prepare your bath immediately?"

"Mn." His voice was calm but distant. "Hot water. Quickly."

As he walked past, everyone bowed deeply but couldn't help sneaking glances.

When the bath was ready, the Emperor washed quietly, his thoughts far from the room. He remembered the moment in the garden — how she'd looked under the moonlight, hands red from digging, eyes soft yet determined.

Her voice had lingered in his mind all night. "I don't need help."

He exhaled deeply, rubbing his temple.

She's impossible.

And yet, his lips curved slightly — not in irritation, but something softer.

When he emerged, dressed in a fresh dark robe, he called for his chief attendant.

"Fetch me a jar of fresh goat milk from the kitchen," he ordered. "And two porcelain bowls. Not silver — porcelain."

The servant blinked in confusion. "Y-yes, Your Majesty."

"And," the Emperor added after a pause, "go to the old storage trunk in my study. There are some small toys there — wooden figures, yarn balls, anything soft. Bring them."

The servant bowed low. "Right away, Your Majesty."

When the items arrived, the Emperor examined them himself — two delicate bowls with blue cloud patterns, a pair of soft yarn balls once made for palace pets, and a small carved wooden rabbit.

He gave them a brief, thoughtful look before saying, "Deliver these to the Empress's chambers. Tell her they are for the kittens."

The eunuch's eyes widened slightly but wisely kept silent. "As Your Majesty commands."

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### The Empress's Chambers

By then, Lian An had finished dressing in a soft pale blue robe and was sitting near the window, gently brushing one kitten's fur with a clean silk handkerchief.

The kittens had nestled themselves into her lap, eyes half-closed in bliss.

Her maid entered quietly. "Your Majesty, shall we prepare your evening meal?"

"Later," Lian An replied. "First, I need to feed them. They must be starving."

She was just considering what to prepare — milk? broth? something soft? — when the door curtain lifted and a palace eunuch entered, bowing deeply.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "His Majesty has sent these."

He held a tray with exquisite care. On it were two porcelain bowls, a small jar of fresh goat milk still warm to the touch, two soft yarn balls, and several tiny wooden toys.

For a moment, Lian An simply stared.

Her maid gasped quietly.

"The Emperor... sent this?" she whispered in disbelief.

The eunuch bowed again. "His Majesty instructed that these are for Your Majesty's kittens."

When he left, the room fell silent.

Lian An blinked once, twice — then a small, amused smile curved her lips.

"So the cold-hearted Emperor knows how to be thoughtful," she murmured, a touch of laughter in her tone. "Maybe the kittens melted his icy pride."

She poured the warm milk carefully into the bowls, placing them before the two tiny creatures.

The kittens perked up immediately, tails twitching. They rushed toward the bowls, their tiny faces dipping eagerly into the milk.

"Slowly, slowly," Lian An said, laughing softly. "You'll choke."

But they didn't listen. Within moments, both bowls were empty, and the kittens lay sprawled on their backs, little bellies round and satisfied.

Lian An chuckled, resting her chin on her palm. "Just look at you — drunk on milk."

Her gaze fell on the toys. The yarn balls gleamed faintly under the lantern light, and the wooden rabbit was so delicately carved she couldn't help but smile.

"He really sent these himself?" she mused quietly. "Strange man."

Still, warmth stirred in her chest — something she quickly pushed down.

"Fine," she said to no one in particular. "If he's softening, I'll thank him in my own way."

She rose and told her maid, "Let's prepare a light dinner. Something he might actually eat without complaint. I'll cook you send it to the Emperor myself."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She hurried off, and soon the smell of fragrant jasmine rice and spicy lotus root filled the room.

As she arranged the dishes on the tray, the soft air shimmered faintly — her ghostly trio had finally returned.

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### The Ghosts Return

Fen Yu floated through the curtain first, hair glowing faintly in the dusk. "We're back!" she sang, twirling midair. "Did you miss us?"

Lian An didn't even glance up. "You were gone long enough for me to enjoy silence."

Wei Rong followed, stretching lazily. "We were scouting the palace kitchens. There's a new cook who makes divine dumplings."

Li Shen drifted in last, calm and unreadable as always. "We also saw some new guards near the west gate."

"Mm-hmm," Lian An said distractedly, eyes on her tray.

Fen Yu tilted her head, curious. "What are those little creatures?"

The three of them froze as they spotted the kittens lying contentedly near the tea table, tiny paws in the air, surrounded by toys.

Fen Yu gasped dramatically. "WHAT are those?!"

Wei Rong blinked. "Are they... replacements for us?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Lian An said, rolling her eyes. "They're kittens. I found them in the garden. Their mother had died. I buried her."

Fen Yu clasped her hands. "Oh no! Poor babies!"

Li Shen floated closer, crouching midair to inspect them. "They're so small..."

The kittens stirred and blinked open their eyes. The white one tilted its tiny head — then suddenly meowed loudly.

"Did... did it just see me?" Fen Yu whispered, astonished.

The gray kitten meowed too, reaching a paw toward the air where the ghosts hovered.

Lian An's eyes widened. "Wait—can they see you?"

All three ghosts exchanged horrified looks.

Wei Rong floated back slightly. "That's not possible. Living creatures can't usually—"

But the kittens kept staring, their eyes bright and curious, tiny paws stretching toward them.

Fen Yu giggled. "They're trying to touch me!"

Lian An blinked, amazed. "So they can see you. And... they're not scared."

The ghosts hovered uncertainly. "Maybe they're special," Li Shen murmured. "Cats can sense spirits... but these two—they're fearless."

The Empress sat back, watching as the kittens meowed happily and tried to bat at the ghosts' forms. It was a strange, almost endearing sight — the living and the dead playing in harmony.

Lian An's sternness softened. "It seems my little ones have unusual company."

Fen Yu laughed, swooping down to tickle the white kitten's ear with a wisp of air. "Then they'll fit right in."

Wei Rong folded his arms, muttering, "Great. Now even cats can see me when I do something embarrassing."

Li Shen only smiled faintly. "Perhaps they were meant to find her."

The Empress glanced at the kittens once more, a small, fond smile touching her lips.

"Maybe," she said softly. "Perhaps they were."

She lifted her gaze toward the window, where the moon had begun to rise again, casting a soft glow over the palace.

For the first time in a long while, her chambers felt full — alive, warm, and just a little chaotic.

As the ghosts bickered playfully and the kittens purred in her lap, Lian An thought, Perhaps peace isn't quiet after all. It's noisy, full of fur and foolishness.

And as she stroked the kittens' soft heads, she whispered, half to herself, half to them, "Welcome home."