

## Ghost 97

Chapter 97: morning

Midnight laid a soft hand over the inner palace, quieting the marble corridors and dimming the lanterns to a hush of gold. Wind moved like silk across the roof tiles; a night bird called once, then swallowed its own voice. Even the bronze water basins in the garden seemed to hold their breath.

Inside the Empress's chamber, the world was small and warm and alive.

Two white kittens were fully awake, wide-eyed stars in a bowl of night. They chased the Emperor's gift of yarn across the carpet—one rolling like a dumpling, the other springing like a rabbit. The red and blue balls skittered, bounced off the leg of a sandalwood table, then spun back like planets tugged by the gravity of small paws. When one kitten caught the yarn and sat upon it with the grave dignity of a mountain, the other leapt upon its sibling in a flurry of paws and surprised squeaks.

The candle flames quivered with their commotion, and warm light touched the lacquered cabinets, the folded screens, the bamboo plant trembling in its porcelain pot. Steam rose faintly from a pot of barley tea the Empress had forgotten to drink.

Lian An sat with her legs folded beneath her on the edge of the bed, hair falling in a loose river over her shoulder. She wore a pale night robe, its collar simple, its sleeves soft with repeated washings. The quiet of the room wrapped her, but did not empty her. Her eyes were too clear for sleep; her mind, too disciplined to wander far.

The three ghosts gathered near, as they always did when the doors closed and protocol could no longer see.

Wei Rong—broad-shouldered even in spirit, a general who had died with steel in his hand—hovered with his arms folded, watching the kittens as if they were unpredictable cavalry.

Fen Yu—small, fierce, incapable of moderation in either fury or love—sat cross-legged on the carpet, cheeks resting in her palms, smiling at the tumbling balls of yarn as though watching a festival parade.

Li Shen—the scholar—kept to the soft lamp’s edge, where the light thinned. He held a brush with no ink and turned it between his fingers, more out of habit than need.

They spoke in voices made for secrecy, yet softened by the strange tenderness that had come to live in this room.

"We’re ready," Wei Rong said simply.

Li Shen nodded. "Prepared."

Fen Yu flashed a small, wicked grin. "Let them try. We’ll still enjoy the night."

Lian An’s mouth almost, almost turned upward. "Good. No more tonight. We’ve earned our quiet."

The kittens collided with Li Shen’s transparent ankle and tumbled backward in affronted surprise. All four—two living, two dead—stared at one another for one long, priceless heartbeat. Then the kittens decided ghost ankles were uncatchable prey and returned to their yarn with dignity.

Lian An watched them, the odd calm that always came when innocence remained nearby. It was strange how these small lives—uninvited, impossible—made a palace feel like a house. How three unseen companions—improbable, inconvenient—made solitude feel like a choice.

She lifted her eyes. "Tomorrow is larger than me," she said softly. "Let it remain so."

Fen Yu flopped backward and kicked her heels toward the ceiling, satisfied to be happy on order. "Then I will sleep with victory under my pillow."

Li Shen set his brush upon the table and extinguished the smallest candle with a breath that did not stir the flame yet stilled it all the same. "Rest strengthens judgment."

"Rest," Lian An agreed.

The room dimmed to the hand-sized circle of the temple lamp. She lay down, drawing the silk over her shoulder. The kittens—obedient to a law older than palaces—climbed into the warm places left open for them: one at the curve of her collarbone, one in the hollow near her elbow. They kneaded without purpose, purred without apology, and then dissolved into sleep as quickly as they had assembled.

The ghosts arranged themselves like sentries in a painting: Wei Rong near the door, Fen Yu drifting toward the canopy's carved phoenix, Li Shen by the window where the bamboo tapped lightly, lightly, like the sound a brush makes when it meets paper.

Outside, a bell tolled once. The hour turned, then turned again.

Somewhere in the long avenues of the outer court, carp-pond water sighed against stone. A guard coughed into his sleeve. A lantern guttered and was relit.

And the Empress slept—finally, deeply, with the untroubled honesty of someone who had chosen her courage already.

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Dawn found the palace before it found the city.

The first bell was not loud, only exact. It entered the ear and told the body what the day required. The second bell braided itself to the first. By the third, kitchens had awakened, stables had loosened their leather, and banners had left their storage boxes to learn the wind again.

Mist lay in the courtyards like milk poured from a silver jug. Servants walked through it in pairs, their breath briefly visible, their hands full of the day's necessities—polished trays, coals brought from the main house, baskets of napery smelling faintly of sun.

At the service gate, eunuchs checked lists with a calm that had been sharpened against panic. The hunt for perfection had begun, and perfection hates to be pursued loudly.

In the great kitchens, heat conquered the air.

Cauldrons spoke in low boiling voices. Woks clanged and sang. Steam beaded upon the foreheads of men who had learned a religion out of timing and flame.

"Duck fat first—only until it glistens. Then ginger. Then broth—no, not that ladle, the deeper one."

"Count the lotus seeds yourself. The Eastern palate will taste it if our hand slips."

"Plate the river fish last. I will not have it weep before the Emperor does."

The head chef passed between stations with a ladle in his hand like a judge's rod. He dipped, tasted, lifted an eyebrow that could demote a sauce to servant's meal. He adjusted salt with a pinch as precise as a physician's measure.

He called, without turning, "Who holds the list of foreign preference?"

A boy answered before he had finished asking. "Sire, the Eastern court sent word—light oil, moderate spice, no vinegar before noon."

"Good. And the wine?"

"South-garden plum—aged ten years."

"Pour it into the jar painted with cranes. Even generosity looks better in the right clay."

Elsewhere, silk learned again how to be beautiful.

Court ladies sat before mirrors while clever hands lifted hair and anchored it with iron disguised as spring. Boxes opened to show hairpins no one outside the walls would ever see: pearl cranes that tilted their heads with every step, river-silver fish that swam when one breathed.

A princess practiced the smile that allowed admiration to pass but not be invited to stay. A minister's wife closed her eyes and remembered three names she must greet first, two she must avoid, one she must pretend not to see.

The pavilion chosen for the banquet endured its own transformation. Workmen unrolled new reed mats whose faint sweetness lifted into the morning air. Boys climbed ladders to attach streamers in the colors of both courts—Central red and Eastern blue—letting them overlap in a third that pleased the eye and, more importantly, the idea.

Musicians tuned on the side terrace where the light would not punish their instruments. The head of the troupe lifted a hand and a small mercy flowed: a scale that began like a question and ended like an answer, then both at once.

It had been a long time since this palace had promised peace to a neighbor. Some of the oldest stones could remember how to lift a gate and receive a guest; few could remember how to set a table and receive a friend.

The morning was busy with the attempt.

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In the Empress's chamber, a quieter preparation began.

Lian An woke before her maid reached the threshold. She knew the difference between sleep that lingers and sleep that is complete. Her body told her she had had the second, and she thanked it silently.

She looked first for the kittens—still there, both; one sprawled like melted wax, one folded like a handkerchief—and then for her unreasonable, reliable dead.

No ghosts. She smiled without surprise. "May your mischief be righteous," she whispered into the place they would have occupied.

Her maid entered, bowed, and could not entirely hide her happiness.

"Your Majesty, the wardrobe has sent four gowns, as you commanded. Shall I lay them in order?"

"Lay them," Lian An said, rising.

Warm water steamed in the basin. Rose and chrysanthemum leaves floated like small boats—courtesies her maid offered when the day would require the Empress to stand longer than kindness would advise.

She washed her face, her wrists, the back of her neck—breathing the steam as if it were a medicine—and let the cloth find the last traces of night from her skin. When she lifted her head, her eyes were clearer. The mirror did not tell her anything she did not already know, but it confirmed she could bear to be seen.

The robes waited, each upon its folded cloud of paper.

Green, the color of bamboo after rain—chaste, clever, a scholar's favorite.

Gold, heavy as a promise—triumph without apology.

Lilac, the color that always arrives first in spring—softness that pretends to be softness.

And red.

The red was not loud. It did not have to be. It knew the story the day was telling and waited to be asked to play its part.

Bell sleeves promised to move like water around the arms. A narrow band of embroidery placed silver where collarbone turned to shoulder, the suggestion of a wing more than the thing itself. The skirt gathered and then let go, a red sea that would break at the ankle without drowning the foot. Along the hem, a pattern no one would see unless they were allowed to be near: cloud, feather, flame—again cloud—again feather—again flame. The repetition calmed what it named.

"This," Lian An said.

The maid's joy jumped to her face. "Yes, Your Majesty."

They dressed her the way one writes an oath—line by line, with care one can still feel in the final sentence.

The sash crossed and held. The weight of the skirt announced itself and then, as most burdens do when a body accepts them, became an ally. The sleeves learned her hands; her hands taught them their limit. The collar framed what it wanted the world to notice—the slope of the neck, the way breath lifts and falls when one is at rest and pretending not to be anything else.

Her hair was old paint made new. The comb found its path without tugging. The parting lay like a road up a green hill. In the mirror, black became a mirror of its own; anything placed in it needed only to sparkle.

Silver blossoms, not many. A pin shaped like a plume. Another like a fish that had learned to fly. One last piece that could almost be called simple, except simplicity cannot hold that much light and remain honest.

Perfume came last. Not the kind that announces itself across a room, but the kind that waits until conversation leans closer. Water-lotus over warm skin, as if the river had risen to greet a summer afternoon and then remembered itself in time.

When it was done, the maid stepped back as if the space required a bow.

Lian An stood.

Her body answered with the truth—her knees did not forget, but they forgave. The old ache lived where it had taken up residence and would leave when it chose. Today it would be a companion who knew how to be quiet.

She faced the bronze mirror. It had witnessed women lie to themselves and women tell themselves the best of their own stories. It reflected what it saw.

A woman in red.

A woman who had knelt and not broken.

A woman whose eyes did not ask permission to look levelly at power.

She did not smile. It would not have been wrong to smile, but the day did not need it yet.

The maid could not keep silent. "Your Majesty," she whispered, the way one speaks to a painting one is not supposed to praise aloud, "today the world will learn they were wrong who thought you only beautiful. Today they will see you are—" She faltered, searched, found it. "—inevitable."

Lian An let out the smallest breath that might someday be mistaken for a laugh. "Brush my sleeves," she said. "And send word that I will be ready."

The maid obeyed, and joy shook her hands only once, quickly, where the sleeve would hide.

Outside, the palace had become a kind of music. Pages hurried with scrolls naming who would sit where—spreading, balancing, preventing insult as an art. Servants rehearsed the offering of cups as if the clay might bruise if handled by someone unskilled. A boy ran—cheeks pink, hair askew—to say that the eastern-gate banners had tangled; a man older than his posture suggested climbed up, corrected them, and climbed down with a dignity that made the correction look like choreography.

News rustled down corridors: cavalry sighted in the distance—no, not cavalry, diplomats' escort—no, a detachment sent ahead to test the road. The rumor moved like fire, was corrected like rain, and left behind the same smell: something important was approaching.

Within the Empress's door, quiet chose not to be offended by urgency. The kittens blinked awake, yawned with their entire faces, and rolled toward the edge of the bed as if pulled by gravity. A maid

caught them both, scolded them gently for attempting to attend state affairs without formal training, and deposited them in a basket lined with an old shawl that had earned the right to touch fur.

Lian An reached down, brushed a fingertip along two noses, and the tiny mouths opened in surprised contentment.

"Guard the chamber," she told them.

Wei Rong would have saluted. Fen Yu would have promised to bite a minister if asked. Li Shen would have written a poem about two emperors born of the same mother—silence.

Instead, the kittens blinked solemnly, which seemed sufficient.

The Empress drew on a fine traveling cloak edged in silver, gathered her breath, and lifted her chin. She was not late. She would not be hurried. She crossed the threshold with a step that asked the day to meet her as an equal.

Behind her, the lamp's flame steadied. In the garden beyond her wall, bamboo wrote itself against the early light. In the kitchens, a soup decided it was ready and told the chef so with a scent.

The palace had prepared all it could prepare.

History would do as it pleased.

And the woman in red went to meet it.