

Ghost 102

Chapter 102: the emperor apology

Morning came late to the palace.

After the storm of the previous night, the sun itself seemed reluctant to rise, spilling light carefully through the lattice windows, soft and golden, as if afraid to wake anyone too quickly.

The Empress's chamber was alive with quiet motion. Boxes lined the room — all lacquered and gilded, some wrapped in brocade, others tied with red silk ribbons. Every box carried the seal of a minister or noble house. The floor looked like a miniature treasury.

The apology gifts had arrived.

Lian An sat gracefully on a low couch, her robe of pale cream spilling around her like light poured over still water. Her two kittens darted among the mountain of boxes, chasing each other, pouncing on the ribbons, occasionally squeezing inside open lids only to emerge again, covered in gold dust and satisfaction.

One kitten pushed over a small chest of jewels; pearls rolled across the carpet like drops of laughter.

Across the room, her ghost companions hovered — very much awake, very much chaotic.

Fen Yu, the mischievous girl ghost, floated upside down above a stack of scrolls, hugging a small lacquer box.

"I call dibs on this one," she announced. "It smells like sandalwood. Definitely perfume or sweets!"

Wei Rong, the stern soldier ghost, folded his arms. "You can't eat perfume."

"Maybe I can," Fen Yu retorted. "I'm dead. Who's to say the rules still apply?"

Li Shen, calm as always, hovered near the window, examining a jade bracelet that shimmered faintly in his translucent hand. "If I were alive, I'd compose an essay on the absurdity of human repentance," he murmured. "They slander, accuse, then send silk and jade to wash it away."

Fen Yu twirled midair. "Good. While you write your essay, I'll pick which apology to keep."

Wei Rong glared. "None of them belong to us."

"Then whose are they?" she said sweetly, clutching her perfume box like a prize.

Wei Rong sighed, the sound more like wind than exasperation. "You're impossible."

Lian An smiled faintly from her seat, watching them bicker. "At least their chaos is quieter than the ministers."

Her maid, Xiaoyu, bowed near the table, opening one of the apology letters. "Your Majesty, Minister Zhou's note says he offers this gold-thread embroidery to atone for 'inadequate judgment in last night's confusion.'"

Fen Yu snorted. "Inadequate judgment! That's a polite way of saying 'I yelled at the wrong person.'"

Lian An didn't even glance at the letter. "Tell him to donate it to the temple," she said, her tone calm but final. "Let his repentance feed someone who needs it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The kittens mewed as if agreeing. One leapt into her lap, the other disappeared entirely into a gift box, tail flicking out like a ribbon.

At that moment, Wei Rong and Fen Yu were still arguing — now over a jeweled fan.

"This one's clearly a warrior's fan," Fen Yu insisted, snapping it open and letting its sequins glint. "Look at the pattern — fire and storm."

"It's a woman's fan," Wei Rong corrected. "You'd know if you ever saw battle."

Fen Yu floated closer to his face. "And you'd know if you ever had taste."

"Enough," Li Shen said mildly, setting down the jade bracelet. "You'll wake the Empress's peace again."

Before either could answer, the chamber door opened with a soft, deliberate sound — not the nervous knock of servants, but the measured entrance of someone who never needed permission.

The air itself seemed to bow.

The Emperor had entered.

Rong Zhen walked in without a word, wearing simple morning robes, his hair tied loosely back. The light behind him turned his figure half-golden, half-shadowed. The ghosts vanished instantly — a silent swish, gone into air. Fen Yu's perfume box dropped to the floor with a faint thud.

The two kittens froze mid-play. Then, as if remembering him from another life, they bounded toward the Emperor — two little balls of fur and courage. Their small paws made no sound on the carpet as they ran, tails wagging, eyes bright.

They stopped at his boots and rubbed their tiny heads against his legs, purring so loudly it seemed impossible for creatures so small.

Rong Zhen looked down.

The corner of his mouth curved, the faintest smile, gone almost as soon as it appeared. He bent down, his long fingers stroking the kittens' soft heads. They mewed again, curling against his hands, eyes half-closing in bliss.

"You two," he murmured quietly, "know how to welcome an Emperor better than most of my court."

From her seat, Lian An spoke without looking at him. "Even kittens know when to be kind."

He rose, turning toward her. "Did you receive the ministers' apologies and gifts?"

Her gaze stayed on the tea cup in her hand. "They arrived," she said softly. "Please, Xiaoyu, have them moved to storage."

The maid hesitated, glancing between them. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The silence between the two rulers was a thing alive — not empty, but charged. The Emperor's eyes flicked over the glittering gifts, then back to her. Her calm face gave nothing away, though her stillness itself spoke louder than anger ever could.

"You're ignoring me," he said finally.

Lian An took a sip of tea. "Am I?"

Rong Zhen's jaw tightened slightly. "You are."

He moved closer. "I came to say something I should have said last night." His voice softened, low but clear. "I'm sorry."

That made her hand pause midair, though she didn't lift her eyes.

"I should have spoken sooner," he continued. "Should have stopped them from humiliating you. I let their noise drown out my judgment."

The teacup clicked softly as she set it down.

When she finally looked at him, her eyes were cool, sharp enough to cut glass. "You let them humiliate me because you always do," she said. "This isn't the first time, Your Majesty. I've long since stopped expecting your defense."

He flinched slightly — not visibly, but she saw the breath he caught before answering. "That's not fair."

"Fair?" she repeated, her voice light and bitter. "You rule a world where fairness bends to your will. What do you know of it?"

He exhaled through his nose, stepping closer. "Do you care at all what I believe?"

Her lips twitched into something between a smirk and a wound. "Believe what you wish. There are people who trust me without needing proof."

That landed like a blade.

His expression changed — not anger at first, but realization. His jaw locked, his voice lowering. "You mean the Eastern Emperor," he said flatly.

She didn't answer, which was answer enough.

Rong Zhen's composure thinned. "So this is it? You'd rather hold faith with a foreign man than your own husband?"

Her silence continued — colder than words.

In two strides he was in front of her, leaning down until their faces were inches apart, their breaths mingling like two flames caught in the same wind.

"You are married," he said quietly, dangerously. "And you cannot be drawn to another man. Not him. Not anyone."

Her heartbeat quickened — but her gaze didn't waver.

"Drawn?" she repeated softly, almost mocking. "You mistake your pride for my loyalty."

Then she pushed him.

He stumbled back a step — not from force, but from surprise. She stood now, her red sleeves falling like banners, her eyes dark and blazing. "My life is mine," she said, her voice sharp as a blade drawn from silk. "You have no right to decide who I speak to, or what I feel."

He froze, staring at her — this woman who defied him without trembling. For a moment, silence swallowed everything — the purring kittens, the fluttering curtains, even the hum of morning.

Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing fast. The space between them shimmered with tension, too bright to name.

And that was when he smiled.

It was small, but real — a rare, dangerous smile, the kind that meant he had seen something he shouldn't, and liked it anyway.

"Your anger suits you," he murmured.

Her eyes widened, her face turning red for an entirely different reason. "You—!"

But he was already turning away. "Calm yourself, Your Majesty," he said smoothly, straightening his sleeves. "I only came to apologize."

"Then leave."

"As you wish."

He paused at the doorway, glancing back just once. The light hit his face, outlining the faintest curve of amusement at the corner of his mouth.

"You push me, yet it's you who blush," he said quietly. "How inconvenient."

Before she could throw something at him, he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

The chamber fell silent again.

The Empress stood frozen for a moment, then pressed her palm against her burning cheek. Her ghosts reappeared one by one — Fen Yu first, of course, snickering.

"Well," Fen Yu said brightly, "if he looked at me like that, I'd faint on purpose."

"Silence," Wei Rong warned, though even he sounded amused.

Li Shen smirked faintly. "The Emperor may be learning how to lose."

Lian An sat back down with a sigh, the kittens jumping immediately into her lap.

"Enough commentary," she muttered, but her ears were still pink.

Outside, the sun had climbed fully over the palace walls, gilding everything in its reach — the apology gifts, the ribbons, the laughter that had survived another night of danger.

The Empress stroked the kittens absently, her expression unreadable. Yet the faintest ghost of a smile — unwilling, uninvited, undeniably there — lingered on her lips.