

Ghost 112

Chapter 112: midnight thieves

The Whisper Bowl slept under the hush of moonlight.

Outside, the market was still. The lamps had burned low, their wicks curling to smoke. The rain from the evening had long dried, leaving behind the cool scent of damp stone and faraway night flowers.

Inside, peace rested like a blanket.

The twins slept curled on the floor near the kitchen, the tall new worker, Wei Jie, dozed against the wall, and upstairs, Yao Qing and Lian An shared the narrow bed. It had been a long day — buying the new shops, laughing until tears came, and planning the future until exhaustion claimed them.

The room was quiet except for the soft rhythm of sleep.

Then—

Thud.

A sound from outside.

Not loud, but sharp — the kind that doesn't belong in the stillness of night.

Lian An stirred. Her eyes snapped open.

Another sound followed — a faint scrape, metal against wood.

Yao Qing turned over and whispered, "Did you hear that?"

The Empress sat up instantly. "Yes."

They both froze, listening.

Downstairs, something moved again — a floorboard creaked.

The ghosts appeared one by one, like pale wisps drawn from the air. Wei Rong's eyes gleamed faintly. "Someone's outside."

Fen Yu tilted her head. "Maybe just rats."

Li Shen frowned. "Those are large rats to sound like men."

Before Yao Qing could speak, another clunk came — the sound of something falling near the kitchen door.

The twins screamed softly from the other room. "Sister Qing! We heard something!"

Everyone was awake now. Wei Jie rushed out, tying his sash, his expression sharp. "Stay here, I'll check."

"No," Yao Qing said, standing. "We all go. If it's thieves, we can't let them escape."

Lian An was already slipping on her outer robe. "Tools. Anything heavy. Quickly."

The kitchen burst into quiet chaos — the twins grabbed rolling pins and ladles; Yao Qing armed herself with the iron spatula; Wei Jie picked up a broom handle like a spear.

Fen Yu floated gleefully above them. "Oh, this will be fun."

"Quiet," Wei Rong snapped. "Let's see who dares steal from us."

They crept toward the main hall, every footstep measured. The only light came from a small lantern Yao Qing held close to her chest.

From the back courtyard came faint whispers — two figures, one short, one tall, silhouettes against the moonlit wall.

Wei Jie glanced at the Empress. "Shall I cover them first?"

Lian An nodded. "Use the bedsheet."

He moved silently, unrolling a thick bedsheet from the laundry pile.

One... two... three—

He threw it high, and the cloth fell like a trap.

The moment it covered the two intruders, everyone lunged.

"Thieves!" Yao Qing shouted.

The twins charged with war cries that could scare chickens. Wei Jie tackled the larger figure to the ground; the Empress grabbed a ladle and hit the smaller one's back.

"Ow! Stop! Wait!" came a muffled cry.

"You dare rob the Whisper Bowl!" Yao Qing shouted, whacking the lump under the sheet.

"Ah! Stop, woman! It's me!"

Lian An froze. That voice — it was familiar.

"Who?" she demanded sharply.

The taller voice groaned, "Lian An, stop this instant! It's your brother!"

Everything went still.

Lian An blinked. "...Lian Ruo?"

The smaller lump whimpered, "And me! Lian Hua!"

Yao Qing froze mid-swing. "Wait—what?!"

The Empress's eyes went wide. "What are you both doing here?!"

She yanked the bedsheet away.

There, on the floor, blinking up at her with matching expressions of pain and outrage, sat her younger sister Lian Hua and her elder cousin brother Lian Ruo — both bruised, dusty, and completely horrified.

Lian Hua's hair was tangled, her cheek red from the ladle hit. Lian Ruo's robe was askew, his jaw swelling slightly.

"By Heaven's mercy," Yao Qing gasped, covering her mouth.

Lian An dropped the ladle immediately. "Oh no..."

Her sister's eyes filled with tears. "You hit me!"

"I didn't know it was you!"

"You threw a bedsheet over us!" Lian Ruo growled, rubbing his shoulder. "I thought we were being kidnapped!"

The Empress knelt, trying not to laugh and panic at the same time. "I thought you were thieves!"

Yao Qing rushed forward, horrified and apologetic. "Oh dear! I'm so sorry, my Lord, my Lady!" She turned to the twins. "Go! Hot water, clean towels, herbs — quickly!"

The twins ran off at once.

Within moments, the small hall turned into a clinic. Yao Qing and the Empress fussed over their unexpected guests, cleaning cuts, applying ointment, and muttering apologies.

Lian Hua sniffled, watching her sister dab her cheek with a wet cloth. "You're supposed to be sick, not attacking people."

Lian An sighed, "I was pretending to be sick, not blind."

Lian Ruo glared but his lips twitched despite himself. "You've always had dramatic ways to meet family."

Once everyone was seated with steaming cups of tea, Yao Qing brought out a tray of honey buns and sweet broth.

Lian Ruo winced as he sipped. "You strike like a soldier, cousin."

"You crept like a thief," she retorted lightly.

Yao Qing chuckled nervously. "Now that misunderstandings are cleared — may I ask, what in Heaven's name were you doing sneaking into our shop at midnight?"

Lian Hua and Lian Ruo exchanged glances.

Finally, Lian Hua spoke. "When we received word that you were pretending about the plague, we didn't believe it at first. Father said to wait, but Mother was crying so much — she thought you were dying and hiding it. So we decided to check for ourselves."

Lian Ruo added, "We couldn't go through the palace gates, so we came to the city. I knew if you weren't in the palace, you'd be here."

Yao Qing blinked. "How did you even find this place?"

"Asked around," he said dryly. "Apparently, everyone knows the Whisper Bowl now. We just didn't expect its owner to be armed with ladles."

That earned a laugh from everyone, even the ghosts hovering above. Fen Yu clapped her hands, whispering to Wei Rong, "Best family reunion ever."

Once the laughter faded, the Empress grew serious again. "I'm sorry I worried you both. I had to fake the illness. I needed time to come here, buy the shops, and meet the merchant who wants to open outlets across the kingdom. No one would have allowed me to leave the palace otherwise."

Lian Hua frowned. "You're risking so much for this place?"

"Yes," Lian An said quietly. "Because this place is mine. It's honest. And it's freedom."

Her cousin looked at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Then I understand."

Lian Hua's expression softened. "Mother and Father will be relieved when they know you're well. You should come home soon. They worry endlessly."

"I will," the Empress promised. "Once the signing is done, and everything is settled here, I'll visit the Duke estate. I owe them that much."

Lian Ruo leaned back with a sigh. "Good. They've been miserable these days — pacing, praying, arguing. Even the bees stopped giving honey because of Mother's crying."

That made Lian An laugh until she nearly spilled her tea. "Poor bees."

Yao Qing smiled warmly. "You'll see them soon. And maybe the Duchess will stop sending priests to bless your name every week."

Lian Hua brightened suddenly. "Can I stay a day here?"

The Empress chuckled. "No. Father will send guards if you disappear."

Lian Hua pouted. "You always get to have all the adventures."

"I also get hit with rumors of plague," Lian An pointed out.

That silenced her sister — for about two seconds.

Then Lian Ruo interrupted with a grin. "Speaking of adventure, I'm starving. We haven't eaten since we left the Duke's estate."

"You didn't have dinner?" Yao Qing gasped.

"There was no time," he said. "We came as soon as we read the letter."

Lian An stood immediately. "Wait here. I'll make something."

"You'll cook?" Lian Hua blinked. "You, the Empress?"

"I run a restaurant," Lian An said with mock pride. "Cooking is now part of my royal duties."

Within minutes, the kitchen came alive again — flames flickering, steam rising, the smell of broth filling the air. The twins helped carry trays, whispering excitedly about the Empress's family.

When the food was ready — stir-fried noodles, steamed buns, and duck soup — Lian Hua and Lian Ruo ate like travelers who had found home.

"This..." Lian Hua sighed, "is the best meal I've had in months."

Lian Ruo nodded between bites. "If you ever open one of these restaurants near the estate, we'll never eat anywhere else."

Lian An smiled quietly, watching them eat. For once, her world felt simple — family, laughter, and food.

When the dishes were cleared, Lian Hua yawned loudly. "We should go before dawn. Father will panic if he finds our rooms empty."

Yao Qing nodded. "I'll have Wei Jie escort you to the carriage road."

They stood at the door, the night air cool against their cheeks. Lian Hua hugged her sister tightly. "Promise you'll come home soon."

"I promise."

Lian Ruo placed a hand on her shoulder. "Take care, cousin. The palace may be full of snakes, but you've always been cleverer than all of them."

Lian An smiled faintly. "Let's hope so."

When they left, the street fell quiet again. The Empress and Yao Qing watched until the shadows of their figures vanished into the dawn mist.

Back inside, the twins yawned and stumbled to their mats. Wei Jie put away the broom, muttering something about "family visits that nearly killed him."

Yao Qing chuckled softly. "What a night."

Lian An nodded, stretching her tired arms. "At least now, my sister and cousin know I'm fine."

"And that you can fight thieves."

Lian An laughed. "That too."

They climbed the stairs together, the lantern light swaying gently behind them.

By the time the moon sank and the first bird cried, the Whisper Bowl was quiet again — warm, safe, and full of secrets that only family could keep.