

Ghost 126

Chapter 126: hunting their shadow

Morning sunlight spilled across The Whisper Bowl's courtyard, touching the steam rising from pots and the scent of spices clinging softly to the air. Workers were training, scribbling characters on wooden slates, while others practiced carrying trays without dropping bowls.

Yao Qing approached the Empress, who was folding aprons for the afternoon shift.

"Where are you going?" she asked suspiciously, seeing Lian An tying her outer robe.

"Just the market," Lian An replied casually, smoothing her hair as if nothing was unusual.

Yao Qing narrowed her eyes.

"You're going alone?"

"Yes."

"No."

Lian An sighed. "I have some work to do."

"Then take someone with you!"

"I don't need anyone."

"You always need someone!" Yao Qing insisted, putting her hands on her hips. "Especially after you fainted that one time! And the time you got lost! And the time—"

"That was ONCE!" Lian An snapped.

Yao Qing glared.

"So take the twins."

"No."

"Take Wei Jie."

"No."

"TAKE SOMEONE!"

Lian An leaned close and whispered,

"I'm not doing human work. I'm doing... ghost work."

Yao Qing immediately froze.

Her mouth clicked shut.

"...Fine. Go," she whispered dramatically.

"And come back alive."

"I always come back alive!"

"That's what dead people say before dying!"

Lian An rolled her eyes and walked out before her friend gave herself a heart attack.

Outside the restaurant, she stepped into the quiet alley and whispered,

"You can come out now."

A shimmer of air rippled.

Wei Rong, the fierce ghost general, materialized first, arms crossed and expression cold.

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, floated down lightly, adjusting his imaginary glasses.

Fen Yu appeared last, sulking with puffed cheeks, still hurt from everything that happened.

The Empress gave her a small smile.

"We're going."

Fen Yu nodded quietly.

Wei Rong straightened.

"Are you sure? Confronting him won't be easy."

"He stole my ring," Lian An said, eyes sharpening. "And he lied to Fen Yu. I'm not letting him keep it."

Li Shen raised a brow.

"He is hiding. It won't be simple."

The Empress lifted her chin arrogantly.

"Then why do I have three ghosts who died fighting, memorizing books, and causing trouble?"

Wei Rong muttered, "I did NOT die causing trouble."

Fen Yu whispered, "I did."

Li Shen sighed. "Yes. She absolutely did."

The Empress clapped her hands.

"Let's go."

And so they went—

four shadows slipping into the busiest part of the capital:

The Old Lantern Market, where humans shopped in the light...

...and ghosts lurked in the cracks where shadows met.

Into the Ghost Alley

They reached the market, noise flooding around them. Peddlers shouted sales. Children ran. Horses trotted by.

But the Empress turned left—

into a dark, narrow passage no human ever entered willingly.

The temperature dropped instantly.

The lantern light dimmed.

The walls warped like mist.

Fen Yu clung to the Empress's sleeve.

"It's so cold..."

"Because we're entering the ghost alley," Li Shen said calmly. "Many wandering spirits hide here."

Wei Rong went ahead, protective.

"Stay behind me."

The ground seemed to ripple under Lian An's feet.

Her breath misted even though it wasn't cold.

Whispers drifted around them.

"A living human..."

"Rare..."

"She can see us..."

"That mortal aura... delicious..."

The Empress lifted an eyebrow.

"If someone touches me, I will exorcise the entire alley."

The whispers immediately vanished.

Fen Yu whispered, "She's so scary. I love it."

Finally, Li Shen pointed ahead.

"There. That's where he hides."

At the end of the crooked alley stood an abandoned house, its door half-broken, shadows swirling around it like hungry serpents.

Fen Yu's hands trembled.

"This is where he took me..."

Lian An placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You are not alone today."

Fen Yu nodded shakily.

Wei Rong flicked his wrist, forming a ghostly spear from thin air.

"Let me handle this."

Li Shen summoned glowing paper talismans, floating around him like fireflies.

And Fen Yu... sniffled, wiping her nose with a dramatic flare.

"I will slap him."

Lian An smiled grimly.

"Good. Let's go."

Confrontation — The Ghost Thief Appears

Wei Rong kicked the rotten door open.

The inside was dark, filled with floating dust that looked like ashes.

A cold voice echoed through the shadows.

"Took you long enough."

The ghost thief emerged from darkness—

a tall, thin man with sharp eyes and a malicious smile.

He flicked the Empress's ring around his finger.

The same ring Fen Yu had foolishly given him.

He smirked.

"Looking for this?"

Fen Yu gasped.

"That's mine—!"

"No," the Empress corrected calmly.

"It's mine."

The thief laughed.

"Then you should thank your little ghost here. She handed it to me like candy."

Fen Yu trembled in embarrassment and anger.

Wei Rong stepped forward, spear raised.

"Return the ring. Now."

Li Shen added firmly,

"Or face the consequences of misleading, stealing, deceiving, and physically harming three spirits."

The ghost thief snorted.

"Harm? I barely touched them."

Fen Yu yelled,

"YOU THREW US INTO A DUNGEON!"

The thief shrugged.

"You're already dead. What's the problem?"

That was the last straw.

Wei Rong lunged.

Ghost Combat — Shadows vs Blade

Wei Rong and the thief clashed in the middle of the room.

Spectral energy burst like lightning.

The Empress stepped back, keeping Fen Yu behind her.

Clang!

Crash!

Boom!

Wei Rong thrust his spear with deadly precision, but the thief moved like smoke.

Li Shen flicked talismans, chanting softly.

Golden seals shot toward the thief—

But the thief dodged, laughing.

"You're too slow, scholar!"

He swung his arm.

A black wave of ghost energy blasted toward the Empress.

Fen Yu screamed.

Wei Rong diverted instantly, shielding her with his body.

The Empress didn't even blink.

"Li Shen."

"On it."

The scholar slammed a talisman into the ground.

A circle of light erupted, trapping the thief inside.

The ghost thief hissed as chains of energy wrapped around him.

"You think this can hold me—?"

Fen Yu stormed forward, grabbed her ghostly sandal—

And smacked him across the face.

SLAP!

"THAT'S FOR LYING TO ME!"

SLAP!!

"THAT'S FOR STEALING!"

SLAP!!!

"That's for touching MY EMRESS'S RING!"

The thief hissed.

"Crazy woman!"

Fen Yu lifted her sandal again.

"You haven't seen crazy yet!"

Li Shen coughed politely.

"Fen Yu... enough. The talisman is weakening."

Wei Rong approached, spear pointed at the thief's throat.

"Return. The. Ring."

The thief swallowed.

He dropped the ring into the Empress's hand.

She held it up, examining it.

"Good," she said lightly. "Now beg Fen Yu for forgiveness."

The thief choked.

"What?"

"You heard her," Wei Rong growled.

Fen Yu crossed her arms smugly.

The thief glared, face twitching.

"...Sorry."

Fen Yu raised her sandal threateningly.

"LOUDER."

"I'M SORRY!"

Fen Yu's smile lit up like spring.

Li Shen released the trap.

Wei Rong shoved the thief out the door.

"If you come near us again," the general warned,

"I will personally scatter your soul."

The thief fled, tripping over debris on his way out.

Fen Yu tossed her hair.

"I hope he trips again."

The Empress slipped her ring back on her finger.

"Good work, all of you."

Found Family — Laughter After Tears

Fen Yu clung to the Empress's arm.

"Thank you... really... I was stupid..."

The Empress rubbed her head gently.

"You're not stupid. You are just lonely."

Fen Yu's eyes softened.

Wei Rong stood proudly behind them.

Li Shen adjusted his imaginary glasses again.

"You know," Li Shen said lightly,

"We make a strange little family."

Fen Yu brightened.

"We do!"

Wei Rong snorted.

"I am not part of a family with these two idiots."

Fen Yu gasped dramatically.

"HOW DARE YOU—WE ARE A FAMILY!"

Li Shen sighed.

"And now you've upset her again."

Fen Yu looked ready to cry again.

Wei Rong panicked.

"I DIDN'T MEAN IT!"

Fen Yu burst into exaggerated sobs.

The Empress burst out laughing first.

Her laughter echoed through the dark alley, warm and unexpectedly healing.

Fen Yu stopped crying instantly.

Wei Rong glared.

"You were faking."

Fen Yu wiped imaginary tears.

"Maybe."

Li Shen laughed behind them.

And for a moment—

despite being a mismatched group of living and dead—

despite the danger, the secrets, the lies—

They felt like a real family.

A strange, chaotic, loving family.