

## **Ghost 128**

Chapter 128: the trial

The world around them melted.

One moment, the Empress and her three ghosts stood inside the shimmering orange sigil.

The next moment—

Silence.

A soft wind brushed against their faces.

Warm sunlight spilled over a golden meadow that stretched endlessly across the horizon.

Flowers glowed with impossible colors—lavender flames, blue roses, silver lilies that hummed like music.

Fen Yu blinked rapidly, her eyes widening.

"This place... it's beautiful."

Li Shen adjusted his robes, astonished.

"It feels like... peace."

General Wei Rong clenched his fists cautiously but even he felt a strange calm seep into his bones.

The Empress turned slowly, her hair gently lifted by the scented breeze.

"It feels... safe."

They walked together across the field.

A sparkling river flowed beside them, warm light bouncing off the surface.

Birds with crystal feathers flew overhead.

Fen Yu laughed, spinning in circles.

"Look! I feel lighter than air. There's no pain in my chest... no heaviness."

For a moment, everything was perfect.

Too perfect.

Because peace never lasts in a trial.

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A distant cracking sound echoed.

The ground trembled.

The flowers wilted instantly, turning to black dust.

The glowing sky cracked like shattered glass.

And darkness oozed into the world like ink poured into water.

Fen Yu's smile froze.

"...What's happening?"

Li Shen grabbed her wrist. "Stay close."

General Wei Rong stepped in front of the Empress, swordless but ready.

"It's a test. This is a spiritual realm—nothing stays pleasant forever."

The Empress exhaled shakily.

The air turned cold, sharp as broken glass.

Their surroundings dissolved into shadows.

No more sky.

No more land.

Just darkness stretching infinitely.

Then—

Soft whispers.

Voices.

Their own thoughts... but twisted.

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Fen Yu's Demon

A dim lantern ignited above them, illuminating a narrow path.

Fen Yu suddenly stopped, her eyes blank.

A feminine voice echoed:

"You are useless, Fen Yu."

A shadowy figure stepped from the darkness.

A ghostly woman with long hair dripping like ink— Fen Yu's former best friend.

The one who betrayed her.

The one who orchestrated her death.

Fen Yu gasped, stepping back.

"N-No... not her..."

The demon-shadow smirked.

"He never loved you. Your fiancé? He preferred me. You died for nothing. You were always replaceable."

Fen Yu trembled violently, tears forming.

"I... I wasn't replaceable..."

"You were weak."

The demon surged forward like smoke, gripping Fen Yu's throat.

"You never had a home. Not in life, not in death."

"Enough!"

The Empress grabbed Fen Yu's hand.

"Fen Yu! Look at me."

Fen Yu's eyes were glassy, drowning in pain.

"You died unjustly," the Empress said fiercely.

"But that doesn't make you worthless. You deserved love. You were loyal. KIND."

Fen Yu shook her head weakly. "But she said—"

"She lied," the Empress replied. "People like her lie because they cannot accept someone brighter than them."

A soft light bloomed around Fen Yu's chest.

Her demon hissed and began to dissolve.

Fen Yu's voice grew steadier.

"I forgive myself... for trusting the wrong people."

And the demon evaporated into dust.

Fen Yu collapsed into the Empress's arms, sobbing.

"I'm... free?"

The Empress smiled softly.

"Yes."

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Li Shen's Demon

The lantern moved again.

This time, the scholar froze.

A figure stepped out of the dark—

a stern old man dressed in ancient minister robes.

Li Shen's father.

The father who beat him for studying "incorrectly."

The father who forced him to become perfect.

The man whose last words were:

"You died because you were weak."

Li Shen's eyes reddened.

His jaw clenched.

The shadow-father sneered.

"You disappointed me. You died with dishonor, leaving nothing behind."

Li Shen trembled fiercely.

His fists shook with restrained rage.

"I tried..." he whispered. "I studied until my hands bled..."

"Not enough."

"I wanted to make you proud..."

"You failed."

Something snapped.

Li Shen screamed.

"I WAS A CHILD! I DID MY BEST! IT WAS NEVER ENOUGH FOR YOU!"

Golden chains broke from around his wrists—chains he had never realized were there.

He lifted his head, eyes glowing.

"I forgive myself... for not being the son you wanted.

I was enough. I AM enough."

His demon shattered like glass, scattering across the void.

Li Shen inhaled shakily.

The Empress placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You were always enough."

He bowed deeply, a rare tear sliding down his cheek.

"Thank you... Your Majesty."

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General Wei Rong's Demon

A heavy thud echoed.

Wei Rong stiffened.

A battlefield formed around him—broken spears, shattered shields, blood.

And then—

His soldiers.

The men he died trying to protect.

Their ghostly forms glared at him.

"General... you said you would save us."

"You promised we would live."

"But we died because you were weak."

Wei Rong staggered back as if stabbed.

"No... I fought until the last breath..."

One soldier, a young boy of eighteen, stepped forward.

His eyes were hollow.

"You said you'd bring me home. My mother died waiting."

Wei Rong's knees hit the ground.

"I tried. I TRIED!"

They surrounded him.

"You failed us."

He shook violently.

"I failed myself more," he whispered hoarsely.

"I never forgave myself... for not being able to save everyone."

The Empress knelt beside him.

"No general can save every soldier."

He looked at her, broken.

"Then what use is a general who can't protect his men?"

"You protected them with your life," she said.

"That is the highest honor."

Wei Rong's breathing steadied.

"I forgive myself... for being human."

His soldiers saluted him once—

Then faded peacefully into light.

Wei Rong bowed his head, tears dripping onto his fist.

"Thank you... Empress."

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The Empress's Demon

The lantern dimmed.

Now only the Empress remained.

A soft, mocking laugh echoed from the shadows.

A figure stepped out—

herself.

But broken.

Tired.

Lonely.

Covered in bruises of emotions, not skin.

Her demon-self smiled cruelly.

"Why pretend? You were always alone.

Before transmigration.

After transmigration.

Even now."

The Empress flinched.

Her demon whispered:

"Your parents died.

You raised yourself.

You never loved.

You never lived.

Even the Emperor didn't choose you."

The Empress trembled.

Fen Yu grabbed her hand.

Li Shen and Wei Rong stepped to her side.

But she pushed them gently.

"I need to face this alone."

Her shadow-self circled her.

"You think this new life gives you meaning?"

They will all leave.

You don't belong in this world."

The Empress shut her eyes.

She saw her old world—

a small restaurant,

her empty room,

her silent tears,

working endlessly to survive.

She saw her new world—

three ghosts who never left her side,

her friend Yao Qing,

the Whisper Bowl,

the bustling kitchen,

the laughter she created,

the life she built with her own hands.

And she spoke:

"I was alone...

but not anymore."

Her demon hissed.

"I was unloved...

but now I am valued."

The demon crumbled.

"I had nothing...

but now I have purpose."

Light burst from her chest, piercing the demon.

"And I forgive myself for surviving.

For beginning again.

For choosing life."

Her demon-self screamed—

then shattered like a dark mirror breaking apart.

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Awakening

The darkness vanished.

They stood once again in the glowing meadow—

this time brighter, softer, real.

Fen Yu wiped her tears but smiled.

Li Shen stood taller.

Wei Rong's shoulders were steadier.

The Empress breathed easily, the weight lifted.

A warm wind brushed against them.

The Shaman's voice echoed gently:

"You passed.

You faced your deepest wounds.

Only those who forgive their past...

can shape their future."

A soft golden gate opened before them.

Fen Yu grinned, floating upward.

"Let's go home!"

Li Shen bowed respectfully toward the fading light.

Wei Rong crossed his arms but smiled faintly.

The Empress stepped forward with all of them beside her—

Stronger.

Brighter.

Free.

And together, they walked into the light.