

## **Ghost 168**

Chapter 168: monkey accusations

The night was deep and quiet, the kind of silence that wrapped itself around the palace like a heavy curtain. The Empress slept soundly, one arm resting on the blanket, breath steady.

Then—

She felt it.

A gaze.

Sharp. Focused. Unmoving.

Her brows knitted even in sleep, a strange unease crawling up her spine. Slowly, she opened her eyes—

And screamed.

"AAAAH—!!"

Three shadows stood right beside her bed.

Three faces hovered in the dim light.

Three pairs of eyes stared at her as if they had just seen the most terrifying thing in existence.

Her three ghosts.

"AAAAH—!!"

They screamed back at the exact same time.

The room exploded with noise.

The Empress clutched the blanket. Fen Yu shrieked and nearly fell backward. Wei Rong instinctively reached for a sword that didn't exist. Li Shen floated straight up in panic.

It was complete chaos.

"What is **WRONG** with you?!" the Empress yelled.

"You screamed first!" Fen Yu cried.

"**YOU** were staring!" Wei Rong snapped.

"Silence—this is undignified!" Li Shen shouted, though his voice cracked.

Before any of them could recover—

The door burst open.

The maid rushed in, pale with fear.

"Your Majesty! What happened? Were you attacked?!"

The Empress froze.

The ghosts froze.

A tense second passed.

Then the Empress cleared her throat, sat up straight, and said calmly,

"No. I just had a bad dream."

The maid looked relieved but confused.

"A... bad dream?"

"Yes," the Empress replied seriously. "In my dream, I saw three monkeys eating my food and staring at me."

There was a beat of silence.

Then—

"HEY!!!" Fen Yu shouted. "Who are you calling a MONKEY?!"

Wei Rong immediately pointed at her.

"She means you. Only you."

Li Shen nodded solemnly.

"Correct. The monkey is female."

Fen Yu gasped dramatically.

"You two traitors!"

The maid stared at the Empress, eyes twitching.

The Empress waved her hand.

"It was a very strange dream. Go back to rest."

The maid bowed, clearly deciding not to ask further questions, and hurried out.

The moment the door closed—

The Empress's expression darkened.

"Now," she said quietly, "shut up and explain. Why were you three staring at me in the middle of the night like funeral lanterns?"

The ghosts immediately straightened.

Li Shen floated forward first, unusually serious.

"We were following Shin Yu all day."

The Empress's eyes sharpened.

"And?"

Wei Rong continued, voice low.

"We didn't find anything unusual. No spells. No oil. No direct interference."

Fen Yu hugged her arms, frowning.

"But... she can see us."

The Empress's heart skipped.

"What?"

"When she was returning from dinner," Fen Yu said, "she looked straight at us. Not past us. At us."

Li Shen nodded.

"And the way she looked... it wasn't fear. It was awareness."

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"It made us uncomfortable."

Fen Yu shivered dramatically.

"I felt cold. Like my soul was being peeled."

The Empress went quiet.

"And the dinner?" she asked.

Li Shen answered,

"The Dowager invited Shin Yu to dine with Lady Chen."

That settled it.

The Empress leaned back against the pillow, eyes narrowed in thought.

"So... she can see ghosts," she murmured. "Or at least sense them."

Fen Yu pouted.

"And you call us monkeys."

The Empress glanced at her.

"You earned it."

Wei Rong let out a low sigh.

"Whatever Shin Yu is... she's not ordinary."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves.

"And she is hiding it very well."

The room fell silent again.

This time, the silence was heavy—not with fear, but with certainty.

The enemy wasn't loud.

Wasn't obvious.

And was already inside the palace.

The Empress closed her eyes slowly.

"Tomorrow," she said, "we dig deeper."

Fen Yu cracked her knuckles.

"And if she really is something scary—"

Wei Rong smirked.

"Then she'll regret staring at monkeys."

Li Shen sighed.

"Immature. All of you."

The Empress smiled faintly despite herself.

At least... she wasn't alone.

But somewhere in the palace—

Someone was watching back.

Morning sunlight slipped gently into the Empress's chamber, soft and warm, but peace was nowhere to be found.

"Give it back!"

"No, I touched it first!"

"You don't even need toys—you're dead!"

"That's discrimination!"

The Empress lay half-awake, one eye twitching.

At the foot of her bed, Fen Yu and Wei Rong were in the middle of a full-blown war over a single woolen cat ball. Fen Yu clutched it to her chest like a priceless treasure, while Wei Rong tried to snatch it away with ghostly speed. Li Shen floated nearby, arms crossed, commenting with deep disappointment.

"This is why history forgets warriors," he sighed. "Reduced to fighting over cat toys."

The cats themselves sat to the side, tails swishing, watching the chaos like amused emperors.

"Enough!" the Empress snapped, sitting up.

All three ghosts froze.

Fen Yu slowly hid the cat ball behind her back.

The Empress rubbed her temples.

"I haven't slept properly in days. If any of you knock over another vase or scream before breakfast, I will personally seal you into a teapot."

Silence.

The ghosts nodded obediently.

She rose, changed, and personally prepared nourishing food for Princess Zhi—light soup, soft rice, herbs carefully balanced to heal both body and spirit. As the food was packed, her gaze drifted toward the cats.

Princess Zhi needs more than medicine... she thought.

Not saying a word, the Empress gently lifted the two cats, stroking their fur.

"You're coming with me today," she murmured.

Fen Yu gasped.

"You're giving away the cats?!"

"Temporarily," the Empress said. "They'll help her heal."

Li Shen nodded slowly.

"Wise. Companionship heals wounds medicine cannot."

Wei Rong added bluntly,

"Also, fewer things for Fen Yu to steal."

"I heard that!" Fen Yu shouted.

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Princess Zhi's Courtyard

Princess Zhi was sitting by the window when the Empress arrived, sunlight falling softly across her pale face. She looked better than before—physically healing—but there was still an emptiness in her eyes.

When she saw the Empress, she smiled faintly.

"You came again."

The Empress placed the food down and then gently set the cats on the bed.

The cats immediately padded forward, sniffed Princess Zhi, and climbed onto her lap without hesitation.

Princess Zhi froze.

Then her lips trembled.

"They... came to me?"

The cats purred, rubbing their heads against her hands.

Her eyes filled with tears—not sharp grief, but something softer.

"They're warm," she whispered.

The Empress sat beside her.

"They'll keep you company. Play with them. Talk to them. They listen better than people."

Princess Zhi let out a small, broken laugh and hugged them close.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I felt so... alone."

The Empress watched her carefully.

Her body is healing, she thought.

But her heart... not yet.

After ensuring she ate properly, the Empress stood to leave.

Princess Zhi hesitated, then asked softly,

"Did His Majesty... find anything?"

The Empress paused.

She chose her words carefully.

"He's busy," she said gently. "No clear leads yet. But his general is working on it. They will find clues."

Princess Zhi nodded, though disappointment flickered briefly across her face.

"I see."

The Empress squeezed her hand.

"Rest. Don't think too much."

As she walked away, the Empress's expression hardened.

Busy... yes.

But not blind.

Whoever did this was careful. Too careful.

And the silence surrounding the truth worried her more than any obvious enemy.

Outside, Fen Yu peeked at the cats through the window, sniffing dramatically.

"They didn't even say goodbye."

Wei Rong glanced at the Empress.

"You did the right thing."

Li Shen added softly,

"Sometimes, staying alive means learning how to feel again."

The Empress exhaled slowly.

She had delivered food.

She had delivered comfort.

But justice—

Justice still hadn't arrived.

And she intended to bring it herself.

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Sunlight filtered through the wooden lattice, falling gently over the low table where the Empress sat with her breakfast. A bowl of warm porridge, pickled vegetables, and steamed buns were neatly arranged. Across from her—though invisible to any living soul—Fen Yu was already on her second bun, Wei Rong ate with soldierly seriousness, and Li Shen sipped soup with exaggerated refinement.

"Slow down," the Empress muttered, stirring her porridge. "You're ghosts, not starving refugees."

Fen Yu huffed.

"I suffered emotional damage yesterday. This is compensation."

Wei Rong nodded solemnly.

"Emotional wounds require nourishment."

Li Shen added dryly,

"History supports this claim."

Just as the Empress lifted her spoon, the maid's voice rang from outside.

"Your Majesty, His Majesty has arrived."

The air froze.

Fen Yu nearly choked.

Wei Rong vanished mid-bite.

Li Shen's bowl tilted dangerously.

"Hide," the Empress hissed through clenched teeth.

The three ghosts moved with practiced speed. Bowls were snatched, buns clutched, and in a blink they had retreated to the far corner of the room—half-hidden behind a screen—still eating quietly like guilty children.

The Emperor stepped inside.

He didn't announce himself.

Didn't speak.

Didn't even look around.

He simply walked to the table, sat opposite the Empress, picked up a pair of chopsticks as if this were the most natural thing in the world—and started eating from her spread.

The Empress blinked.

"...Good morning?" she said slowly.

He hummed in acknowledgment, taking a sip of soup.

For a moment, only the sound of chopsticks and porcelain filled the room.

The Empress studied him over the rim of her bowl.

He looks tired, she thought.

But calmer than yesterday.

She broke the silence first.

"Did you find anything?" she asked quietly.

The Emperor paused, then shook his head.

"Nothing concrete. The path was clean. No footprints. No residue. As if the oil appeared and vanished in the same breath."

Her fingers tightened around the spoon.

"So still nothing," she murmured.

"But," he continued, "my general hasn't stopped digging. If someone did this, they will slip eventually."

From the corner, Fen Yu mouthed exaggeratedly: 'Eventually.'

Wei Rong elbowed her.

The Emperor glanced around the room briefly, eyes narrowing slightly.

"...Where are the cats?" he asked.

The Empress looked up.

"I gave them to Princess Zhi," she said calmly. "She needs company. They help."

He was silent for a moment.

Then he nodded.

"That was thoughtful."

The word lingered between them—soft, sincere.

He picked up another bun.

"She shouldn't be alone right now."

The Empress looked at him, surprised by the gentleness in his tone.

They ate quietly again.

From the corner, Li Shen leaned toward Fen Yu and whispered,

"They eat like a married couple who don't know how to talk."

Fen Yu nodded.

"Tragic."

Wei Rong added,

"Dangerous."

The Empress finished her porridge and stood.

"I'll prepare lunch for Princess Zhi later," she said.

The Emperor looked up at her.

"Don't exhaust yourself."

She paused, then replied flatly,

"I won't."

Their eyes met—briefly, meaningfully.

Neither mentioned the ghosts in the corner.

Neither mentioned the things they couldn't say.

But both understood one thing clearly:

This case was far from over.

And whatever hid within the palace walls was bold enough to reach a princess—

and silent enough to leave no trace at all.

From behind the screen, Fen Yu whispered dramatically,

"I don't like this."

Li Shen nodded.

"Nor do I."

Wei Rong's hand rested on the hilt of a sword only he could see.

Neither living nor dead felt at ease.

Something was moving.

And it was already too close.