

Ghost 59

Chapter 59: the quarrel of the dead

The sun had already vanished behind the high vermilion walls of Duke Lian's estate, leaving behind streaks of rose and violet that faded into the hush of night.

Soft laughter floated from the garden where maids were lighting oil lamps, their warm glow spilling over the carved railings. The air smelled faintly of incense and blooming jasmine.

Inside her chamber, Empress Lian An sat by the window, chin propped on her palm, a half-finished embroidery frame before her.

The golden thread hung loose from the needle, forming a crooked phoenix tail — the image of a bird that looked more like a dying chicken than a royal emblem.

She frowned at it.

Then sighed.

The palace might have been peaceful, but her mind wasn't.

It had been three whole days since she last saw them — her ghostly trio of chaos. The once ever-present laughter, the teasing comments, the ghostly hands tugging her sleeves — all gone.

Silence.

It was almost suspiciously quiet.

Her lips pursed. "They better not have gotten themselves exorcised," she muttered. "Or worse... maybe some wandering witch trapped them in a spirit jar for extra pocket money."

Then she shook her head. "No, that's impossible. They'd haunt the witch within five minutes and steal her broomstick for fun."

Still, a part of her couldn't help but wonder where her ridiculous spirit companions had gone.

"Honestly," she said to the empty room, poking at the embroidery with a sigh. "If they've gone to terrorize the kitchens again, I'm not saving them this time."

A Sudden Crash

Her musings were cut short by a bang — loud enough to make her embroidery frame jump.

The chamber door rattled violently as if something invisible had slammed into it.

And then —

"You two-faced cheating scholar!"

The voice was shrill, furious, and painfully familiar.

Lian An blinked once, expression flat. "...Found them."

Before she could rise, the door flew open of its own accord — a gust of cold air swirling inside like a miniature storm. Her candle flames flickered wildly, and the temperature dropped several degrees.

Then came the chaos.

"Your Majesty!" Fen Yu, the fiery female ghost, burst through the wall instead of the doorway, her long sleeves in tatters, her translucent hair floating like wild silk. "You won't believe what that rotten scholar did!"

Hot on her tail came Wei Rong, the old general ghost, floating in behind her with an exasperated scowl. His armor shimmered faintly, though one shoulder plate appeared dented. "Oh, we're telling her now? Fine! Then tell her how you started a war in a tea shop!"

Finally — floating in with the guilty calm of a cat that just destroyed an altar — was Li Shen, the scholar ghost. His usually neat robes were covered in ash, his ink-stained hands raised in surrender.

"I didn't start anything!" he cried. "I was having tea — just tea! — with a friend."

Fen Yu shrieked, "A friend?! You call that spirit-leeching temptress from the East Cemetery a friend?!"

Lian An pinched the bridge of her nose. "Here we go again..."

The Accusation

Wei Rong, ever the dramatic old soldier, slammed his phantom spear butt on the floor — purely for effect, since it passed through the tiles harmlessly. "Allow me to report, Your Majesty. Li Shen here decided to go on a 'literary outing' with a female ghost!"

"It was a scholarly discussion!" Li Shen interjected.

"Over tea," Fen Yu spat. "At night! Under the moon!"

The scholar ghost groaned. "Because ghosts can't go out in daylight, Fen Yu!"

"Oh really?" she sneered. "Then why did she call you 'sweet quill' and feed you lotus cakes?!"

Lian An's brows rose. "She called you what now?"

Li Shen turned the color of mist. "It's— it's a term of poetic endearment."

Fen Yu scoffed. "Poetic, my foot! She's a spirit-sucking banshee with too much rouge!"

Wei Rong folded his arms. "And naturally, we went to defend his honor."

"Defend?" Lian An echoed, crossing her arms. "That never ends well with you three."

The "Battle"

Fen Yu jabbed a finger toward Wei Rong. "He brought his spear and broke their tea table!"

"It was an accident!" Wei Rong bellowed. "I was gesturing!"

"With your weapon?!" Li Shen exclaimed.

"She threw a teapot first!" Wei Rong protested.

Fen Yu huffed. "She did, after I called her a spirit leech and told her her hair looked like a burnt broom."

Lian An groaned into her hand. "Of course you did."

The general puffed his chest. "We fought bravely! Three versus four, Your Majesty!"

"Three?"

"Yes," Fen Yu said proudly. "Me, him, and Li Shen—well, technically two and a half, since Li Shen hid behind a chair."

"I was strategizing!" Li Shen said defensively.

"Strategizing how to run!" she shot back.

Lian An's eyebrow twitched. "And who were the opponents?"

Fen Yu scowled. "Her! That... witch-faced scholar ghost! She had her sisters with her. And she was mean!"

"How mean?"

Fen Yu flung out her arms dramatically. "She smacked me with a spirit fan, kicked Wei Rong through a wall, and stole all our things!"

"All?" Lian An repeated.

Wei Rong sighed. "Everything. My silver coin, Li Shen's ink, Fen Yu's favorite jade comb. Even my ghost boot vanished."

Lian An blinked slowly. "She mugged the three of you?"

All three nodded miserably.

There was silence — then Lian An let out a laugh she couldn't suppress.

"You three," she said between chuckles, "went to avenge a love affair and got beaten up and robbed. Even ghosts can't escape bad luck."

Fen Yu pouted, folding her arms. "Your Majesty is cruel! We almost died—again!"

"You're already dead," Lian An pointed out.

Fen Yu stomped her translucent foot. "That's not the point!"

Wei Rong grumbled, "If I ever meet that spirit woman again, I'll haunt her tomb for eternity."

Li Shen muttered, "I should never have gone to that tea shop."

"You think?!" both of them shouted in unison.

Royal Mediation

The Empress had endured assassins, conspiracies, and noble banquets full of poison. But nothing tested her patience quite like three ghosts acting like children after a brawl.

She exhaled slowly and stood, folding her arms. "All right, enough. Let me summarize — you three crashed a ghost date, insulted the girl, started a tea shop riot, got beaten senseless, and lost everything you owned."

Fen Yu raised a timid finger. "And possibly set the teahouse curtains on fire."

"Possibly?"

"They were very flammable!" she protested.

Lian An pinched her nose again. "Heaven above... Why am I friends with you?"

Wei Rong straightened. "Because we are loyal and brave!"

"And occasionally idiotic," she muttered.

Still, she couldn't help but smile. They were ridiculous — loud, childish, impulsive — but they brought life to her otherwise suffocating palace days.

"Fine," she said, moving toward her jewelry box. "Since you've suffered... and clearly lost everything... I'll compensate you."

The ghosts perked up immediately, all three leaning forward like children awaiting candy.

"Fen Yu," Lian An began, retrieving a gold hairpin, delicate and bright. "This is for you."

The girl ghost gasped. "For me?! Oh, Your Majesty—"

Lian An cut her off with a wry smile. "You're dramatic enough to deserve it. But if you break another fan or burn another teahouse, I'll banish you to the temple stables for a month."

Fen Yu grinned from ear to ear. "Never again, I swear!"

Next, she turned to Wei Rong, pulling out a silver dagger etched with phoenix feathers. "Since you still believe you're commanding ghost armies, take this. Maybe it'll remind you to protect, not destroy."

He puffed out his chest, bowing with exaggerated formality. "I shall wield it with honor!"

"Just don't stab anyone in honor again."

Finally, she faced Li Shen, who stood awkwardly at the back, scratching his spectral neck.

Lian An held out a fine jade pen and a pot of black ink. "And you — next time you court someone, at least write her a decent poem before you start chaos."

Li Shen coughed. "I'll... take that advice to heart."

"Do," she said sweetly, "because next time, I'm not saving you from a furious ghost harem."

Fen Yu cackled, Wei Rong tried not to laugh, and even Li Shen's lips twitched despite himself.

The Empress crossed her arms, expression stern but her eyes glimmering. "Now, I'm serious. If I hear of one more tea shop riot or ghost scandal, you'll be polishing temple bells until next winter. Understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" they chorused instantly.

"Good. Now leave — before you scare my maids again."

The Calm After Chaos

The three ghosts drifted back toward the wall, their laughter fading as they disappeared into the evening mist.

Silence filled the room once more — but it was no longer empty.

Lian An sat back by her window, the cool breeze brushing her cheek. She could still hear faint giggles echoing from somewhere near the courtyard — and the muffled sound of Fen Yu shouting, "You still owe me a new fan!" followed by Wei Rong's booming laugh.

She shook her head, smiling to herself. "Troublesome spirits... but at least never dull."

Her eyes softened as she gazed out into the night. For the first time in days, her chamber felt warm again — not because of the lamps, but because of the laughter that clung faintly to the air like the lingering scent of jasmine.