

## Ghost 89

Chapter 89: the thieves

The sun had started to dip behind the golden roofs of the palace, painting the sky in soft shades of rose and amber. The ceremonies were finally over, the endless formalities done. Servants scurried around, clearing the banners and flower garlands from the courtyard, their laughter faint and tired.

Emperor Rong Zhen walked beside Lian An toward her chambers. For once, he was silent — not with coldness, but something heavier, thoughtful. The air between them carried a strange stillness.

When they reached the corridor leading to her residence, he stopped. The sunlight reflected off his crown and caught the sharp edges of his face.

"You've done well today," he said at last, his tone lower than usual. "But your legs haven't healed completely. Rest. Don't wander the palace too much alone."

Lian An tilted her head, her eyes narrowing with mischief. "Is His Majesty worried for me?"

He looked at her — and for a moment, she could have sworn there was the faintest flicker of something human in his expression.

Then she smirked. "Or..." Her tone turned teasing, soft but edged with amusement. "Is His Majesty jealous that the visiting Emperor might try to talk to me again?"

The question hung in the air.

He stiffened. His jaw clenched, the faintest muscle jumping beneath his cheek.

Rong Zhen looked away, expression unreadable. "You should rest," he said simply, and then turned on his heel, walking away without another word.

Lian An watched his retreating figure, an amused smile curving her lips. "So he can get jealous," she murmured under her breath.

Her maid Yun'er blinked, confused. "Your Majesty said something?"

"Nothing," Lian An replied, still smiling. "Let's go back. I think I've earned a long nap."

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### A Strange Sight in the Chamber

The palace corridors were quiet by the time she returned. The servants had lit the oil lamps, their golden glow flickering softly against carved wooden panels. She stepped through the doorway of her chamber — and froze.

There, on the floor before her, was chaos.

A mountain of random items lay in the middle of her room — glittering hairpins, jade combs, silver ornaments, a tray of pastries, a polished sword, an ink brush, even a pair of embroidered shoes.

"What in heaven's name..." she whispered, eyes wide.

Yun'er gasped behind her. "Your Majesty! Did someone break in?"

Lian An's mind raced. A pile like this, in her quarters? These were not her possessions. Each one looked like it belonged to someone else — noblewomen, scholars, guards... She could already imagine how this would sound to the palace gossips.

A thief hiding stolen items in the Empress's chamber!

Her stomach dropped. "No," she muttered sharply. "No, no. Someone's trying to frame me."

She stepped closer to inspect — a golden pin engraved with the Dowager's phoenix crest, a delicately painted fan clearly belonging to Lady Chen's sister, and a sword etched with the mark of the Imperial Guards.

Every piece screamed trouble.

She crouched, picking up a hair ornament and frowning. "Who would—"

And then she heard it.

A familiar, whispery giggle from the doorway.

Her expression darkened instantly.

She turned — and there they were.

Her ghosts.

Fen Yu floated in first, arms overflowing with trinkets and food. Behind her, Wei Rong stumbled in mid-air with a small porcelain jar clutched to his chest, while Li Shen followed lazily, holding what looked suspiciously like a nobleman's inkstone.

All three froze when they saw her.

"Ah... Mistress," Fen Yu said weakly, smile faltering. "You're... back early."

Lian An's eyebrow twitched. "What. Is. This?"

They exchanged glances. None spoke.

"Answer me," she said, her voice low and deadly calm.

Wei Rong tried first, laughing nervously. "We, uh, found these. Floating around. We thought they might be useful."

"Useful?" Her tone sharpened. "For what? Starting a war?!"

Li Shen coughed. "Technically, no one was using them. Some of them were on shelves—"

She pointed toward the floor. "And you decided to steal them?"

Silence.

The three ghosts looked like children caught with stolen sweets.

Lian An's temples throbbed. Without another word, she stormed to the door, slammed it shut, and locked it. Then she turned to her stunned maid.

"Yun'er," she said through gritted teeth, forcing a smile, "I'm tired. I'll rest now. No one enters until I say so."

The maid bowed quickly. "Yes, Your Majesty."

As soon as the door clicked closed, her expression dropped.

She faced the ghosts, eyes blazing. "You three," she said coldly. "Stay right there."

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## The Storm Breaks

Fen Yu floated backward, holding the fan like a shield. "Wait, Mistress, we can explain!"

"Explain?" Lian An hissed. "I've been breaking my back trying to feed you, house you, hide you—and you're out here looting the palace like grave robbers?"

Wei Rong raised his hands defensively. "We didn't mean to—"

"I give you food every day!" she snapped. "You have better meals than the living servants! And you're stealing from nobles? From Lady Chen's family?!"

They all flinched.

Fen Yu tried to smile. "We thought we were helping. The fan was dirty. I was going to clean it—"

"Clean it? By stealing it?!"

"Uh..."

Her eyes flashed dangerously.

Without thinking, she reached for the nearest object — a rolled-up scroll — and hurled it at them. It passed harmlessly through Wei Rong, but he yelped anyway.

"Mistress!" he cried. "Violence is not the answer!"

"Silence!" she barked, grabbing the next thing within reach — a slipper.

It sailed through the air with deadly accuracy and hit Wei Rong squarely in the face.

"OW!" he wailed dramatically, though the slipper, of course, went right through him. "You aimed! You actually aimed!"

"I did," she said icily. "And I'll do it again if you don't explain why you thought it was acceptable to drag half the palace into my room!"

Fen Yu's lower lip trembled. "We just... wanted something new. All the things you give us are—well, used. We wanted something shiny and fresh for once."

For a second, Lian An just stared.

Then, slowly, dangerously, her eye twitched. "Used?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Fen Yu realized too late what she'd said. "Ah! I mean—beloved! Nostalgic! Historical—"

Too late.

Lian An grabbed another slipper.

"No, wait!" Wei Rong cried. "You'll ruin my face! Ghost girls will laugh at me—"

The slipper passed through him again, and he clutched his phantom cheek dramatically. "Ow! This will definitely leave a mark!"

Li Shen, ever the calm one, crossed his arms and said mildly, "Technically, we don't have skin."

Wei Rong glared at him. "You're not helping."

Lian An took a deep breath, her voice trembling with restrained fury. "All right. Enough."

They froze.

"I've had it with you three," she said, pointing at the pile. "You will return every single thing you stole. Every comb, every fan, every—whatever that is!" She gestured toward the sword. "Put it all back exactly where you found it."

The ghosts exchanged glances.

Fen Yu pouted. "But Mistress—"

"Now!"

Their shoulders slumped. "Yes, Mistress..."

One by one, they began gathering the stolen items, muttering as they floated toward the walls.

"This is unfair," Fen Yu grumbled.

"I told you the sword was too much," Li Shen muttered.

"At least let me keep the hairpin," Wei Rong whined.

She shot them a glare. They fell silent immediately.

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## The Punishment

Half an hour later, the room was clean again. Every item was gone, the floor spotless. The Empress stood by her table, arms crossed, watching as the three ghosts drifted back into the chamber with the most pitiful expressions imaginable.

"Done?" she asked coolly.

"Yes, Mistress," they chorused.

"Good," she said. "Now... your punishment."

Fen Yu's eyes widened. "Punishment? Again? But we already suffered emotionally!"

Lian An pointed toward the corner where a large porcelain vase stood. "You three—there."

They blinked. "There?"

"Now."

They floated hesitantly toward it.

Wei Rong sighed. "This is humiliation."

She ignored him, reaching for a length of red silk rope she used for meditation. She held it up, and the ghosts paled — or would have, if they still had blood.

"You can't actually tie us," Li Shen said weakly. "We're incorporeal—"

"Try me," she said flatly, murmuring a quick sealing charm under her breath. The silk glowed faintly gold.

All three ghosts gasped as the charm pulled tight around their spectral forms, binding them loosely to the vase like translucent ribbons.

"Mistress!" Wei Rong yelled. "This is barbaric!"

Lian An arched a brow. "Consider it a learning experience. You'll stay there until dawn."

Fen Yu's voice turned small. "No food?"

"None."

Wei Rong's shoulders slumped. "Cruel. Unforgivable. Oppression of ghosts."

Lian An crossed her arms. "Keep talking and I'll add another day."

They all went silent instantly.

She turned away, sighing heavily as she sat by her table, rubbing her temples. "You three will be the death of me again," she muttered.

The ghosts whispered among themselves.

"She's scary when she's angry," Fen Yu murmured.

"She's scarier when she's calm," Li Shen replied.

"I think she enjoys this," Wei Rong added miserably.

"Quiet," Lian An said without even turning around.

They all froze.

For a while, silence filled the room — save for the faint sound of the evening wind outside.

Finally, she spoke again, her voice softer. "I feed you. I protect you. Just... don't make my life harder than it already is."

The ghosts exchanged guilty looks.

Fen Yu whispered, "Sorry, Mistress..."

Lian An leaned back, exhaustion finally settling in. "Go to sleep," she muttered. "If I see another stolen spoon in this room tomorrow, I'll exorcise all of you."

And with that, she blew out the lamp.

As the room fell into soft darkness, three sulking ghosts hung by the vase like punished children — occasionally whispering complaints until she threw another slipper their way.