

Ghost 164

Chapter 164: the silence no ghost can break

Night settled heavily over the palace, the kind of night that pressed down on the chest and made even breathing feel loud. Empress Lian An sat alone in her chamber, the lamp beside her flickering weakly, shadows crawling up the walls like restless thoughts.

Her fingers clenched slowly.

Princess Zhi's pale face. The pool of blood. The baby that never cried.

Someone had done this.

She was certain of it.

And yet... every path she chased led only to silence.

A cold wind brushed past her ear.

One by one, the ghosts began to appear.

Wei Rong, the general ghost, stood stiffly near the pillar, arms crossed, brows furrowed deep in thought.

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, hovered near the window, folding and unfolding his sleeves as if still sorting through records that no longer existed.

Fen Yu, the female ghost, lingered closest to the Empress, her earlier playfulness completely gone, her eyes rimmed red.

They had been gone all night.

Searching.

Asking.

Forcing answers from every wandering spirit within the palace grounds.

And they had returned with nothing.

Wei Rong broke the silence first.

"Your Majesty," he said slowly, his voice unusually restrained, "we questioned every ghost who lingers near Princess Zhi's courtyard. Garden spirits. Servant ghosts. Even the restless ones who roam the corridors at dawn."

Lian An lifted her eyes. "And?"

Wei Rong clenched his jaw. "No one saw anything unusual."

Her heart sank, just a fraction.

Li Shen stepped forward, expression grave. "Not a single spirit witnessed oil being poured. Not before the fall. Not after. No unfamiliar presence. No strange aura."

"That's impossible," Lian An said quietly.

Fen Yu hugged her arms around herself. "We thought so too. So we asked again. And again. Some ghosts were terrified. Others swore on their remaining resentment. But they all said the same thing."

She swallowed. "It just... appeared."

The words echoed unnaturally in the room.

Appeared.

Lian An stood abruptly, pacing.

"Oily floors don't appear out of nothing," she said sharply. "Someone put it there. Someone wanted her to fall. She was eight months pregnant—one fall is enough to kill a child."

Her nails dug into her palm.

"This wasn't an accident."

Wei Rong nodded heavily. "We agree. But whatever was used... it left no trace in the spirit realm."

Li Shen's voice lowered. "Which means one thing."

All eyes turned to him.

"This wasn't done by ordinary means."

The lamp flame flickered violently.

Lian An froze. "You mean—"

"Something beyond common ghosts," Li Shen continued. "Either a sealed technique... or something that doesn't belong fully to this world."

Her breath turned cold.

Ghost–human breeding.

The barbaric cult.

The shaman's warning.

Her mind connected the threads with terrifying clarity.

Fen Yu whispered, "Sister... what if they didn't pour the oil?"

Lian An turned slowly. "Explain."

Fen Yu hesitated, then spoke. "What if they... created it? Manifested it for only a moment? Long enough for her to step on it—then erased it?"

Wei Rong's eyes darkened. "That would explain why no ghost saw anything. And why the guards found nothing afterward."

Li Shen nodded grimly. "A technique that exists between realms. Neither fully ghost nor fully human."

Lian An's knees weakened.

She sat down slowly.

"So even ghosts couldn't see it," she murmured. "That means... Princess Zhi never had a chance."

The silence that followed was heavy, crushing.

Fen Yu's eyes filled again. "She was kind. She fed stray cats. She spoke gently even to servants."

Wei Rong looked away. "And the child... never even opened his eyes."

Lian An pressed a hand to her chest.

Guilt clawed upward.

"I promised her justice," she whispered. "I told her I would find who did this."

She looked up, eyes burning.

"And I will."

Li Shen bowed slightly. "Your Majesty, this enemy is careful. Skilled. They wanted no witnesses—not even us."

Wei Rong straightened. "Which means they will act again."

Fen Yu nodded fiercely. "And next time, it may not be a fall."

Lian An closed her eyes.

She remembered Princess Zhi's weak grip on her sleeve.

Her broken voice asking where her baby was.

The emptiness that followed the answer.

When she opened her eyes again, they were steady.

"Then we prepare," she said quietly.

The ghosts stilled.

"We observe everyone who enters and leaves her courtyard. Human and non-human. Anyone whose presence feels... wrong."

Li Shen inclined his head. "I will watch the spiritual currents."

Wei Rong said, "I will guard her from the shadows."

Fen Yu clenched her fists. "And I will never leave her side."

Lian An exhaled slowly.

Still... something gnawed at her.

If even ghosts saw nothing...

Then whoever did this wasn't just hiding.

They were mocking them.

Her gaze drifted toward the dark courtyard outside.

Somewhere in this palace, someone had killed a child without lifting a visible hand.

And smiled, knowing no one had seen.

Lian An whispered into the night, voice cold and certain:

"You think you are invisible."

A pause.

"You're not."

The ghosts felt it then — a shift in the air, subtle but unmistakable.

The calm before a storm.

The room remained dim long after the ghosts finished reporting. The oil incident still clung to the air like an invisible stain—untouchable, unexplained, and deeply unsettling.

Empress Lian An did not sit.

She stood by the window, fingers resting against the wooden frame, eyes fixed on the courtyard where Princess Zhi had fallen. Moonlight washed the stone path pale, innocent, as if it had never tasted blood.

Her voice broke the silence.

"Prince Liang," she said slowly. "His concubine."

The three ghosts froze.

Wei Rong turned first, brows knitting together. "Concubine?"

Fen Yu blinked. "What concubine?"

Li Shen frowned deeply, sleeves stiffening as if an old scroll had just torn itself open in his mind. "Your Majesty... Prince Liang was known to be devoted to Princess Zhi. There were no other women in his courtyard. None."

Lian An turned around.

"She's called Shin Gu," she said quietly. "She visited him last night."

The ghosts stared at her.

Fen Yu's mouth fell open. "Last night?"

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "Impossible. I patrol the prince's residence every night. There was no unfamiliar presence."

Li Shen's eyes sharpened. "If a woman entered... we would have sensed her."

"That's what worries me," Lian An said.

She walked back to the table and sat, fingers interlacing slowly. Her face was calm, but something sharp burned beneath the surface.

"I saw her," she continued. "Not clearly. But I felt her presence. She was... wrong."

Fen Yu hugged herself. "Wrong how?"

"Like she wasn't entirely human," Lian An replied. "But not a ghost either."

The room fell deathly quiet.

Wei Rong clenched his fists. "Your Majesty... if what you're saying is true, then this woman is hiding her existence even from us."

Li Shen inhaled slowly. "Which would mean she is protected by something stronger than ordinary spiritual concealment."

Fen Yu whispered, "Like the oil..."

Lian An nodded.

"Yes. The same method."

The realization hit them all at once.

Fen Yu's face paled. "So the person who killed the baby... and the concubine..."

"...are connected," Wei Rong finished grimly.

Li Shen closed his eyes briefly. "Or the same."

Lian An's jaw tightened.

"Tell me," she said. "Have any of you ever seen this woman? Even once?"

Wei Rong shook his head immediately. "Never."

Fen Yu shook hers too. "No. I've followed Prince Liang countless times. He only ever went to Princess Zhi."

Li Shen looked troubled. "This is the first time I've even heard that Prince Liang had a concubine."

Lian An's gaze sharpened. "Do you know who gave her to him?"

The ghosts exchanged glances.

Fen Yu spoke softly. "The Dowager Empress."

The name landed like a stone dropped into still water.

Lian An exhaled slowly.

Of course.

The Dowager Empress had always disliked Princess Zhi—too gentle, too quiet, too unassertive. A woman like her did not fit the Dowager's idea of strength.

"She granted Shin Gu to Prince Liang," Lian An said, more statement than question.

Li Shen nodded grimly. "That aligns with her methods."

Wei Rong's voice lowered. "And if the Dowager was involved... then this matter is deeper than personal jealousy."

Fen Yu clenched her fists. "She killed a baby."

"She may not have done it herself," Lian An said quietly. "But she opened the door."

Her eyes darkened.

"And someone else walked through."

A long silence followed.

Then Fen Yu whispered, trembling, "Sister... why can't we see her?"

Lian An leaned back slowly.

"Because she doesn't want to be seen," she said. "Not by humans. Not by ghosts."

Li Shen's lips pressed thin. "That requires a cultivation level beyond wandering spirits."

Wei Rong added, "Or the protection of a cult."

The word hung heavy.

Cult.

Ghost-human breeding.

Blood moon.

Nine months.

Lian An's fingers curled tightly.

"Prince Liang is being used," she said. "Whether he knows it or not."

Fen Yu's voice shook with anger. "He blamed Princess Zhi. He blocked you from seeing her."

Wei Rong growled. "Coward."

"He's weak," Lian An replied. "And weakness is easy to manipulate."

She stood again.

"This woman—Shin Gu—entered his life quietly. Gave him comfort. Distracted him. Enchanted him."

Li Shen nodded slowly. "And removed the obstacle."

Fen Yu's eyes burned. "Princess Zhi."

"And her unborn son," Lian An finished.

The lamp flickered violently.

Outside, a night bird cried once, sharp and broken.

"We will watch her," Lian An said firmly. "Every movement. Every breath."

Wei Rong bowed. "I will guard Princess Zhi personally."

Li Shen said, "I will trace Shin Gu's spiritual residue."

Fen Yu swallowed, then nodded. "And I will follow Prince Liang. If he meets her again... I'll know."

Lian An looked at them, gratitude flickering briefly in her eyes.

"Be careful," she warned. "This enemy hides well. And she is not afraid to kill."

Fen Yu straightened. "Neither are we."

Lian An turned back toward the window, gaze sharp as steel.

Somewhere in the palace, a woman no ghost could see was sleeping peacefully—believing herself untouchable.

Lian An's lips curved faintly, cold and dangerous.

"Enjoy your invisibility," she murmured.

"It won't last."