

Ghost 166

Chapter 166: unseen hand

The courtyard was quiet.

Too quiet.

A thin breeze moved through the hanging curtains, lifting them just enough for sunlight to scatter across the stone floor. Princess Zhi sat wrapped in a light shawl, her bowl now empty, her hands resting loosely in her lap.

Lian An did not speak immediately.

She stood, walked a few steps, and deliberately glanced around the courtyard—at the trees, the corners, the doorway, even the shadows beneath the pillars. Only when she was certain no servant lingered nearby did she return and sit closer to Princess Zhi.

Lowering her voice, she said carefully,

"Zhi... I have a doubt."

Princess Zhi turned toward her.

"A doubt?" she asked softly.

Lian An met her eyes. "I suspect Shin Gu."

The words fell gently—but the impact was sharp.

Princess Zhi stiffened, then immediately shook her head.

"No," she said, more firmly than before. "That's impossible."

Lian An did not interrupt.

Princess Zhi continued, her tone steady but tinged with something defensive.

"She never treated me badly. Not once. She sent toys for the baby... small clothes... even blankets. Everything was prepared with care."

Her fingers tightened unconsciously around the edge of her shawl.

"She doesn't speak much. She doesn't mingle. She keeps to herself—but that doesn't mean she would hurt my child."

Lian An watched her closely.

"I know," she said quietly. "That alone isn't proof."

She leaned back slightly, her gaze turning thoughtful.

"But listen to this," she continued. "I asked around. I asked everyone. Guards, maids, even people who usually notice things others miss."

Princess Zhi looked at her, waiting.

"No one," Lian An said slowly, "saw anyone pour oil. No one saw a bottle. No one saw movement. Nothing."

Princess Zhi frowned.

"That path... I walk it every day," she whispered. "The guards check it daily. How could oil appear for just a moment?"

"That's exactly the problem," Lian An replied.

Her brows knit together, frustration flickering across her face.

"In my previous world," she muttered almost unconsciously, "we would have checked cameras. Every corner, every angle. One glance and we'd know who did it."

Princess Zhi blinked. "Cameras?"

Lian An froze for half a heartbeat.

"...Never mind," she said quickly, forcing a small smile. "Just... a way to see things people miss."

She exhaled slowly.

"Here," she continued, "if no one saw anything, then either the timing was perfect... or the method wasn't ordinary."

Princess Zhi's expression changed—uncertainty creeping in despite herself.

"You mean..." she hesitated, "...someone planned it?"

"Yes," Lian An said without hesitation. "And planned it well."

Princess Zhi looked down at her hands.

"I don't want to believe it was Shin Gu," she said quietly. "But... I also don't understand how this happened."

Lian An reached out again, placing her hand gently over hers.

"I won't accuse anyone without proof," she said. "I promise you that. But I won't ignore this either."

Her voice hardened just slightly.

"Someone caused you to lose your child. Accident or not—I will find out how."

Princess Zhi closed her eyes.

For the first time since waking, her composure cracked just a little.

"...Thank you," she whispered.

Outside the courtyard, unseen and unheard, faint ripples stirred the air.

If there were unseen hands at work—

Then unseen eyes would start watching back...

The Lake That Should Not Have Been Reached

The farewell was quiet.

Princess Zhi lay resting, her face pale but calmer than before. When Lian An stood to leave, Zhi reached out and caught her sleeve.

"Be careful," Princess Zhi said softly. "I don't know why, but... my heart feels unsettled."

Lian An smiled, squeezing her hand. "Rest. I'll come again tomorrow."

She turned and stepped out of the courtyard, the afternoon sun warm on her shoulders. The palace paths were familiar—too familiar. She had walked them countless times.

And yet—

Something felt... off.

Her steps slowed.

Her thoughts drifted.

The sound of the palace faded, as if someone had wrapped her mind in cotton. Her surroundings blurred—not fully disappearing, but losing meaning. Her body kept moving, one step after another, smooth and unresisting.

Like a puppet.

Like someone else had taken hold of the strings.

The Emperor's Shout

"LIAN AN!"

The shout tore through the air.

Sharp. Urgent. Terrified.

Her body jerked—but did not stop.

The Emperor had just turned a corner near the lakeside when he saw her.

At first, he thought nothing of it. The Empress often walked to clear her mind. But something about her posture made his blood run cold.

She wasn't looking ahead.

She wasn't looking anywhere.

Her eyes were unfocused. Empty. Her steps were straight, deliberate—leading directly toward the lake.

"Lian An!" he called again, breaking into a run.

She didn't respond.

His heart slammed violently against his ribs.

She's not hearing me.

She's not here.

He ran faster.

"LIAN AN!"

The water was only a few steps away now.

If she took one more—

He lunged forward and grabbed her arm, yanking her back with all his strength.

She stumbled, gasped—and suddenly awareness flooded back into her eyes.

"What—?"

Before she could finish, he pulled her into his arms.

Hard.

Tightly.

Instinctively.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

She could feel his heartbeat—fast, uneven, real.

He had never touched her like this before.

Never crossed that invisible line.

Her hands hovered in the air, frozen in shock.

"If I hadn't been there..." his voice was low, strained, barely controlled. "One more step."

She followed his gaze.

The lake shimmered quietly beside them.

Her breath caught.

"I... I don't remember coming here," she whispered.

That was when he knew.

His fear wasn't misplaced.

Back to the Chamber

He didn't let go until they were inside her chamber, doors shut, guards dismissed.

Only then did he release her—slowly, as if afraid she might vanish if he didn't.

"Tell me," he said, his voice steady but his eyes dark. "What happened."

She sat down, hands trembling slightly.

"I left Princess Zhi's courtyard," she said. "I was walking back. I remember the path... then nothing."

She looked up at him. "The next thing I knew, you were shouting my name."

His jaw tightened.

"You were walking like you were being led," he said. "Not pushed. Not forced. Guided."

Silence fell between them.

Then, at the same time, they spoke.

"The oil," she said.

"The miscarriage," he said.

Their eyes locked.

"It's the same person," Lian An said quietly. "The one who caused Princess Zhi to lose her child."

He nodded slowly.

"And now they tried to take you," he finished.

A chill crept through the room.

"The palace," she whispered. "They're inside the palace."

"And stronger than we expected," he said grimly. "Because whatever this is—it bypassed guards, routines... and even you."

She clenched her fists.

"I didn't feel pain. Or fear," she said. "Just... emptiness."

That frightened him more than anything.

"This isn't an accident," he said. "And it's not random."

He met her gaze fully now, no distance, no mask.

"Someone powerful is moving unseen. And they're testing boundaries."

She swallowed.

"Princess Zhi's baby... and now me."

He stepped closer again, not touching this time—but standing solidly in front of her.

"From now on," he said, voice iron-clad, "you are never alone."

She looked at him—really looked.

And for the first time, she saw the truth clearly in his eyes.

This wasn't suspicion.

This wasn't control.

This was fear.

Fear of losing her.

"They underestimated us," she said quietly. "That was their mistake."

A faint, dangerous smile crossed his face.

"Yes," he replied. "And now... they've revealed themselves."

Outside the chamber, the palace remained peaceful.

Inside, two minds had reached the same conclusion:

The enemy was closer than anyone realized.

And the next move would decide everything.

The room fell into a tense quiet after the Emperor's words.

"She can't be the one," he said firmly. "Shin Gu is gentle. Quiet. She keeps to herself. She dislikes company, avoids conflict, and has never shown interest in palace affairs."

Lian An looked at him for a long moment.

"That is exactly why I doubt her," she replied softly.

He frowned. "You're letting grief cloud your judgment."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I'm letting patterns speak."

She stood and slowly walked to the window, her fingers brushing the carved wood as she organized her thoughts.

"Think about it," she continued. "Princess Zhi slipped in a place she walks every day. Oil appeared for a single moment and vanished just as quickly. No servant saw anything. No guard heard a sound. Even the ghosts saw nothing."

She turned back to him, her eyes sharp.

"Then I walked toward the lake like I was being guided. Not pushed. Not threatened. Controlled."

The Emperor's expression darkened.

"That kind of influence," she said quietly, "is not common. It's subtle. Clean. Almost... gentle."

He inhaled slowly.

"You think she's connected to ghost breeding," he said.

"I think," Lian An corrected, "that whoever is behind ghost-human breeding is hiding in plain sight. Someone no one watches. Someone people describe as harmless."

He clenched his jaw. "Shin Gu is a princess from a neighboring kingdom. She barely leaves her courtyard. She sends gifts to Princess Zhi. Toys. Baby clothes."

"Which makes her untouchable," Lian An said. "And unaccountable."

Silence stretched.

The Emperor finally spoke, his voice lower now. "You're accusing someone without proof."

"I know," she replied. "That's why I'm not acting. Yet."

She met his gaze steadily.

"But you must consider this—ghost breeders need access. Privacy. And protection. Who in this palace has all three?"

His fingers curled slowly into a fist.

"...Concubines," he admitted.

"And among them," Lian An said, "who do we know the least about?"

His answer didn't come immediately.

When it did, it was quiet.

"Shin Gu."

Lian An nodded once. "I'm not asking you to accuse her. I'm asking you to watch her."

He exhaled sharply, conflicted.

"If you're wrong—"

"Then I'll stop," she said at once. "I won't drag an innocent woman into suspicion. But if I'm right..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

She didn't need to.

The Emperor looked at her, really looked at her—at the calm resolve in her face, the intelligence behind her eyes, the quiet strength she hadn't possessed before.

"You've changed," he said softly.

"Yes," she replied. "Because someone tried to take my life. And before that, they took a child."

His gaze hardened.

"...I'll have people watch her movements," he said finally. "Quietly. No disturbance. No rumors."

Lian An released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"And if this is connected to ghost breeding," he added, voice cold, "then whoever is behind it won't escape. I don't care who they are."

A faint, dangerous calm settled between them.

Outside, the palace lanterns swayed gently in the night breeze.

Inside, a line had been crossed.

And somewhere in the palace—

someone who believed themselves unseen had just become a suspect.