

Ghost 171

Chapter 171: culprit

The first drumbeat shattered the quiet of the palace.

Dong—

Its echo rolled across the courtyards, through carved corridors, past sleeping pavilions and guarded gates. Birds startled from the eaves. Servants froze mid-step.

Then came the second beat.

Dong—

And the third.

Dong—

Every person in the inner palace knew what it meant.

An emergency court summons.

Within moments, eunuchs rushed through the palace shouting the announcement, their voices sharp and formal:

> "By imperial order—

The culprit behind Princess Zhi's accident has been captured.

All officials and members of the royal family are to assemble in the main court within half an hour!"

Shock in the Empress's Courtyard

Empress Lian An had just finished washing her hands when the sound reached her.

She stiffened.

Her reflection in the bronze mirror seemed to pause with her.

"Caught?" she murmured.

Behind her, the air shifted.

Fen Yu appeared first, hair still loosely tied, eyes wide. Wei Rong emerged next, arms crossed, expression dark. Li Shen floated down from the beam near the ceiling, fan snapping shut.

"That was fast," Fen Yu said, disbelief dripping from her voice.

"Too fast," Wei Rong corrected coldly.

Li Shen's brows knit together. "No matter how you look at it, this doesn't add up."

Lian An turned slowly, her fingers tightening around the cloth in her hand.

"They're announcing a culprit," she said quietly. "But yesterday... the Emperor said nothing. Not a word."

Fen Yu scoffed. "Because he didn't catch the real one."

Wei Rong's gaze sharpened. "Or because this isn't about justice."

Silence followed.

Then Li Shen spoke again, his tone measured but heavy.

"They may be using a scapegoat."

Fen Yu's lips curled. "Exactly. Someone expendable. Someone convenient."

Lian An closed her eyes briefly.

Her mind flashed back to the way Shin Gu had looked at the ghosts—calm, unbothered, almost amused. To the chill that had crawled up her spine when Shin Gu's gaze lingered in empty air.

"They don't have proof against the real culprit," Lian An said slowly. "So they're creating closure."

Wei Rong nodded. "And closure makes people careless."

Fen Yu's eyes lit up. "If the real culprit thinks everyone believes this lie... they'll lower their guard."

Li Shen folded his fan, tapping it once against his palm. "And when powerful people lower their guard, they make mistakes."

Lian An exhaled.

"...Then we watch," she said. "Carefully."

Fen Yu grinned. "Oh, I love watching lies collapse."

Entering the Court

By the time Lian An arrived at the main court, it was already filled.

Officials stood in orderly rows. Ministers whispered behind sleeves. Noblewomen sat rigidly, faces painted with controlled curiosity. Guards lined the walls, unmoving as statues.

At the front sat the Emperor, his expression unreadable.

To his left—

Princess Zhi.

She sat alone.

Her face was pale but composed, her hands resting lightly on her lap. The familiar weight of grief lingered around her, but when she noticed Lian An, her eyes softened.

Lian An approached quietly and sat beside her.

"How are you feeling today?" Lian An asked gently.

Princess Zhi smiled faintly. "Better. The cats... they help. They don't let me think too much."

Lian An's chest tightened.

"I'm glad."

Princess Zhi hesitated, then asked softly, "Did you hear? They say they caught the one responsible."

"Yes," Lian An replied, watching her carefully. "Do you know who?"

Princess Zhi nodded. "My husband said it was an accident. A mistake."

A mistake.

Lian An said nothing, but her fingers curled slightly.

Before she could ask more, footsteps echoed across the stone floor.

Prince Liang stepped forward.

The murmurs died instantly.

The Official Narrative

Prince Liang bowed to the Emperor, then turned to face the court.

"On the day of Princess Zhi's accident," he began, voice steady, "the imperial kitchen was undergoing temporary relocation. Supplies were being transferred from the old kitchen to a newly assigned one."

His words were calm. Too calm.

"The route used passed near the garden path Princess Zhi takes during her daily walk."

A scroll was presented. A eunuch unrolled it.

"During the transfer," Prince Liang continued, "a container of oil was accidentally spilled. Three kitchen workers slipped and were injured."

At his signal, four people were brought forward.

Three were wrapped in bandages, walking stiffly. The fourth—a kitchen supervisor—bowed deeply, forehead nearly touching the floor.

The injured workers spoke one by one, repeating the same story.

"Yes, Your Majesty..." "It was an accident..." "We slipped as well..." "We reported it to the healer immediately..."

The kitchen head followed, voice trembling. "There is a record of the incident. The healer treated them that day."

Prince Liang turned slightly. "Summon the healer."

The healer stepped forward, bowing nervously.

"The records confirm it," the healer said. "Three kitchen workers were treated for injuries from slipping oil at the stated time."

The court erupted in murmurs.

Lian An's heart sank.

The story was airtight.

Too airtight.

The Emperor listened in silence, fingers resting against his throne.

Finally, he spoke.

"All kitchen staff involved will submit written apologies to the princess zhi. This month's salary will be deducted."

His gaze shifted to Princess Zhi.

"Do you wish to add further punishment?"

The court held its breath.

Princess Zhi rose slowly.

"No," she said quietly. "It was an accident. I do not wish to punish anyone further."

Her voice was calm.

But Lian An felt the lie burning underneath.

Watching the Lie Breathe

As the court proceedings moved on, Lian An didn't listen to the rest.

Her focus sharpened instead.

Not on the kitchen workers.

Not on Prince Liang.

But on the absence.

Shin Gu was not present.

Fen Yu whispered in her ear, unheard by anyone else. "Notice something?"

"Yes," Lian An murmured back. "She's not here."

Wei Rong's voice followed, low and grim. "Someone powerful never stands close to the lie. They let others speak for them."

Li Shen sighed softly. "And when everyone accepts the explanation... that's when the real trap closes."

Lian An glanced at Princess Zhi.

She sat quietly now, eyes lowered, hands folded.

Trusting.

Believing.

Or choosing not to fight.

Lian An's jaw tightened.

This isn't over, she thought.

Not even close.

After the Court

As people began to disperse, whispers filled the air.

"Such a relief..." "At least it wasn't foul play..." "Poor Princess Zhi..." "Accidents happen..."

Lian An stood slowly.

Princess Zhi looked up. "It's settled now," she said softly. "You don't have to worry."

Lian An forced a small smile.

"I'll still stay with you today," she replied. "If that's alright."

Princess Zhi nodded, grateful.

Behind them, unseen, three ghosts watched the court empty.

Fen Yu crossed her arms. "What a beautiful lie."

Wei Rong's eyes burned. "And lies like this rot from the inside."

Li Shen opened his fan again. "The real culprit will feel safe now."

Lian An walked forward, her steps calm, her expression composed.

But inside—

She was already planning.

Because when someone powerful believes they've escaped judgment...

They always reveal themselves.

After leaving the court, Empress Lian An returned to her chamber alone.

The palace corridors felt longer than usual, the carved pillars casting stretched shadows on the marble floor. Every step echoed too clearly, as if the palace itself was listening to her thoughts.

Inside her chamber, she dismissed the maids with a wave of her hand.

"Leave me for a while."

The doors closed softly.

She sat by the window, sunlight falling across her sleeves, yet she felt cold.

The court's scene replayed again and again in her mind.

The injured kitchen workers.

The healer's records.

Prince Liang's calm explanation.

Princess Zhi's quiet acceptance.

Everything had been arranged too perfectly.

Accidents were messy. Truth was uneven.

But what she had seen today was smooth.

Too smooth.

She rested her chin in her palm, eyes unfocused.

"Why does this feel wrong..." she murmured.

The air stirred.

Wei Rong appeared near the door, arms crossed, expression grim. Fen Yu hovered near the beam, legs dangling, unusually quiet. Li Shen stood beside the bookshelf, fan half-open, gaze distant.

For once, none of them joked.

They were thinking the same thing.

Li Shen broke the silence first.

"We questioned the ghosts."

Lian An straightened slightly. "All of them?"

"Yes," Li Shen replied. "Kitchen ghosts. Corridor ghosts. Even the old ones who linger near the garden paths."

Fen Yu frowned, her usual sharpness dulled by confusion.

"They don't lie about things like this," she said. "They can exaggerate feelings, forget faces... but events? No."

Wei Rong nodded slowly. "Every ghost said the same thing."

Lian An's fingers tightened on her sleeve. "Which is?"

"That day," Wei Rong said, voice low, "nothing unusual happened."

No spilled oil.

No relocation chaos.

No sudden commotion.

Fen Yu added bitterly, "No one slipped. No one cried for help. No healer was summoned in panic."

The chamber fell silent again.

Lian An's heart sank.

"But... the injured workers?" she asked. "The records?"

Li Shen closed his fan with a soft snap.

"That's the problem."

He turned to her, eyes sharp.

"The ghosts remember patterns. Routines. Locations."

He continued slowly, deliberately.

"The imperial kitchen was never relocated that day."

Lian An looked up sharply. "Never?"

Li Shen nodded. "I know because I went there myself."

Both Fen Yu and Wei Rong turned toward him.

"I often visit the kitchen area," Li Shen said calmly. "There's a ghost there—an old friend of mine. I passed through that path multiple times that day."

He paused.

"The kitchen was exactly where it always is."

Fen Yu's eyes widened. "Then how—"

"How did injured workers suddenly appear?" Wei Rong finished.

Lian An exhaled slowly.

"And yet everyone believes the story," she said quietly.

"Yes," Li Shen replied. "Because it has witnesses, records, and authority behind it."

Fen Yu clicked her tongue in frustration. "So the truth doesn't matter."

Lian An looked out the window again.

The palace courtyard was peaceful. Servants walked calmly. Life continued.

Princess Zhi would believe it was an accident.

The court would move on.

The Emperor would accept the explanation—for now.

And the real culprit...

"...is still here," Lian An said softly.

Wei Rong's voice hardened. "And confident."

Fen Yu floated closer, expression serious for once.

"When someone can rewrite reality like this—create injuries, records, and memories—they aren't ordinary."

Li Shen nodded. "And the most dangerous part?"

Lian An turned back to them. "What?"

"They did it in the palace," Li Shen said. "In the heart of power. Without leaving a trace."

A chill crept up Lian An's spine.

She finally understood why the drumbeat that morning had felt wrong.

It wasn't announcing justice.

It was announcing control.

She stood slowly.

"Everyone believes the lie," she said. "Which means the liar feels safe."

Fen Yu's lips curved into a thin smile. "And safe people make mistakes."

Wei Rong placed a hand over his sword hilt. "Then we wait."

Li Shen bowed his head slightly. "And watch."

Lian An's gaze hardened, no longer uncertain.

"This isn't over," she said. "They wanted silence."

Her eyes darkened.

"So we'll listen harder."