

Ghost 172

Chapter 172: whisper beneath the palace

Night descended over the palace like a heavy curtain.

Lanterns glowed softly along the corridors, their light reflected in polished jade tiles. From afar, everything looked peaceful—too peaceful. Servants moved quietly, guards stood at attention, and the imperial roofs rested beneath the moon like sleeping beasts.

But beneath that calm surface, something stirred.

Something unseen.

Something forbidden.

The Ghosts Feel It First

Fen Yu was the first to react.

She had been floating lazily above the Empress's courtyard, complaining about boredom, when her expression suddenly froze. Her laughter cut off mid-sentence, eyes widening as if she had been splashed with icy water.

"...Do you feel that?" she whispered.

Wei Rong materialized instantly beside her, his usual relaxed posture gone. His hand instinctively moved to the hilt of his ghostly sword.

"Yes," he said grimly. "It's back."

Li Shen appeared last, fan already closed, his scholarly calm replaced by sharp alertness.

"This is not residual," Li Shen said quietly. "This is active."

The air itself felt wrong.

Not cold.

Not hot.

But dense—as if something heavy was pressing down on the palace, seeping through walls, slipping between breaths.

Forbidden energy.

Fen Yu hugged herself unconsciously. "This... this is the same feeling as before. But stronger."

Wei Rong nodded. "And closer."

They all turned toward the inner palace.

Toward Princess Zhi's residence.

Princess Zhi — The Unwitting Trigger

Princess Zhi sat alone in her courtyard, wrapped in a light shawl despite the warm night.

Since losing the child, sleep came in fragments. She woke often, heart racing, hand instinctively pressing against her abdomen—only to remember, again and again, that there was nothing there.

Tonight, she had dismissed her maids early.

She wanted silence.

She wanted to breathe.

The two cats lay curled near her feet, their soft purring usually comforting. But tonight, even they seemed restless, tails flicking, ears twitching toward shadows that should not exist.

Princess Zhi closed her eyes and whispered, barely audible:

"Little one... if you can hear me... forgive your mother."

The words were soaked in grief.

And grief, when deep enough, could thin the boundary between worlds.

The moment her tears touched the stone floor—

The lantern beside her flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then steadied.

Princess Zhi frowned, wiping her eyes.

"Must be the wind," she murmured.

But there was no wind.

In that instant, the forbidden energy surged.

Not violently.

Subtly.

Like a breath being taken.

The Ghosts Rush In

Fen Yu gasped sharply.

"She did something," she said. "She didn't mean to—but something responded."

Li Shen's eyes narrowed. "Grief. Blood. Loss of life. These are openings."

Wei Rong was already moving. "We need to inform the Empress."

They reached Empress Lian An's chamber in moments, slipping through walls without a sound.

The Empress was still awake, seated at her desk, reviewing notes she had made since the court session. The moment the three ghosts appeared, she knew something was wrong.

"You feel it too," she said, standing immediately.

"Yes," Li Shen replied. "It's spreading."

Fen Yu pointed toward Princess Zhi's direction. "It reacted to her."

Lian An's breath caught. "Is she in danger?"

"Not yet," Wei Rong said. "But she has become... a point."

A focal point.

Lian An clenched her fists. "She doesn't deserve this."

"No," Fen Yu said softly. "And that's exactly why it's using her."

The Emperor's Doubt Grows

Elsewhere in the palace, the Emperor sat alone in his study.

The court had dispersed hours ago, yet he remained seated, staring at the written testimonies laid out before him.

Kitchen workers.

Healer records.

Time logs.

Everything aligned.

And yet—

He rubbed his temple slowly.

Something about it refused to settle.

He had ruled long enough to recognize when a story was too clean.

He stood and walked to the window, looking out toward Princess Zhi's courtyard.

A faint unease tightened in his chest.

"She survived eight months," he murmured. "One slip... and everything is lost?"

His fingers tightened around the window frame.

He remembered Empress Lian An's expression in court.

She hadn't argued loudly.

She hadn't accused.

She had simply looked unconvinced.

And that troubled him more than any protest.

The Emperor turned sharply.

"Eunuch."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Summon the head of palace security," he said. "Quietly."

He paused, then added, "And... bring me the original route maps of the inner kitchens. Not copies."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the eunuch left, the Emperor exhaled slowly.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said to the empty room.

A Crack in the Story

Meanwhile, Princess Zhi stirred uneasily.

Her chest felt tight.

The cats suddenly leapt up, hissing at the darkness near the corridor.

"Hey—what's wrong?" she asked softly.

For a brief second, she thought she saw something ripple near the stone pillar.

Like heat above a flame.

Then it vanished.

Princess Zhi shivered.

"Empress Sister..." she whispered unconsciously.

At that exact moment, Lian An felt it.

A pull.

A thread tightening.

"She's calling for me," Lian An said, already moving.

Wei Rong stepped in front of her. "Careful. Whatever this is—it's watching."

"I know," Lian An replied calmly. "But I won't leave her alone."

The Forbidden Energy Reveals a Clue

When Lian An reached Princess Zhi's courtyard, she immediately sensed it.

The air here was different.

Thicker.

She sat beside Princess Zhi, taking her hand gently.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

Princess Zhi shook her head slowly. "No... just tired. And... I thought I saw something."

Lian An nodded. "Tell me."

Before Princess Zhi could speak further—

One of the cats suddenly darted toward a specific patch of stone near the path.

It scratched wildly, hissing, refusing to retreat.

Wei Rong's eyes locked onto that spot.

"There," he said. "That's where it passed."

Fen Yu hovered lower, eyes glowing faintly. "There's residue. Very faint—but deliberate."

Li Shen crouched, examining the pattern of energy only he could see.

"This isn't random," he said. "It's a path. Someone walked here."

Lian An's heart pounded.

"This is the same path Princess Zhi walks every day," she said slowly.

"And," Fen Yu added grimly, "the same path where the 'accident' happened."

Princess Zhi's hand trembled in Lian An's grasp.

"You mean... someone was here?"

"Yes," Lian An said gently. "And they didn't want to be seen."

The Emperor Connects the Dots

At the same hour, the Emperor studied the original kitchen route maps.

His brow furrowed deeper with every passing moment.

"The kitchens were never relocated," he said flatly.

The head of security swallowed. "Your Majesty... the records—"

"Were written after the incident," the Emperor interrupted. "Weren't they?"

Silence.

That was answer enough.

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

When he opened them, the warmth was gone.

"Someone fabricated a chain of events," he said coldly. "And used my authority to seal it."

He stood.

"Princess Zhi's accident," he continued, "was not an accident."

His gaze sharpened.

"And whoever did this... is confident enough to operate inside my palace."

A Silent Agreement

Back in Princess Zhi's courtyard, the forbidden energy faded, as if retreating after being noticed.

Fen Yu exhaled shakily. "It knows we sensed it."

Li Shen nodded. "Which means it will either hide... or strike again."

Lian An looked down at Princess Zhi, who clutched her sleeve tightly.

"I promise you," Lian An said quietly, fiercely. "Your child will not be forgotten."

Wei Rong's sword hummed faintly at his side.

Li Shen straightened.

Fen Yu's playful expression hardened into something sharp and dangerous.

Somewhere else in the palace, the Emperor gave an order that would quietly shift everything.

Two sides of the same truth were moving closer.

And the one hiding in the shadows—

Had just made their first mistake.