

Ghost 173

Chapter 173: silk curtain

Night settled over the palace like a thin veil of ink, quiet on the surface, restless underneath.

The Emperor stood alone in his study, fingers tapping slowly against the edge of the table. Reports lay scattered before him—kitchen logs, guard rotations, healer records, testimonies written in neat, obedient handwriting. Every line told the same story. Too neat. Too clean.

An accident.

A mistake.

Oil spilled.

Fate.

He had ruled long enough to know that when every voice repeated the same truth, it was rarely the real one.

His thoughts returned, unbidden, to Shin Gu.

Gentle smile.

Soft voice.

Perfect manners.

Too perfect.

The Emperor closed the file and stood. There was only one person he could ask directly—someone who slept beside the center of the storm.

1. The Emperor and Prince Liang

Prince Liang's courtyard was lit even at this late hour. The sound of porcelain clinking echoed faintly—wine cups. The Emperor paused at the entrance, then stepped in without announcement.

Prince Liang looked up sharply. "Brother?"

His eyes were rimmed red, grief still clinging to him like a second skin. The loss of his son had hollowed something inside him, though anger now filled the empty space.

"I came to talk," the Emperor said calmly.

Prince Liang laughed bitterly. "About my wife? Or my concubine? Or perhaps about how you think you know my household better than I do?"

The Emperor did not rise to the bait. He sat across from him. "I want to know if you noticed anything... unusual. About Shin Gu."

Prince Liang's expression darkened instantly.

"There it is," he said coldly. "So you are trying to create a rift."

The Emperor's brows knit slightly. "This has nothing to do with palace politics."

Prince Liang stood abruptly. "Then why are you asking about her? Shin Gu has done nothing wrong. She has been nothing but considerate—she sent gifts for the baby, prayed for Zhi, never once disrespected her."

His voice rose. "And now, because Zhi lost the child, you want someone to blame. First your wife empress blames her. Now you."

The Emperor's tone sharpened. "I am not blaming. I am asking."

Prince Liang pointed toward the door. "Then ask someone else. You interfere enough already. My household does not need the Emperor's suspicions poisoning it further."

For a moment, the air grew heavy.

The Emperor stood. "Very well. But understand this—if someone did harm Princess Zhi, intentionally or otherwise, I will find them. Even if you choose not to see it."

Prince Liang turned away. "Leave."

The Emperor left without another word, but his certainty only deepened.

Prince Liang's anger was real.

His blindness was deeper.

2. The Ghosts' Reluctant Confirmation

Back in the Empress's chamber, the atmosphere was tense.

Only Lian An could see the three ghosts gathered near the window—Li Shen with his arms folded, Wei Rong rigid and alert, and Fen Yu unusually quiet, hovering close to the ceiling.

"Well?" the Empress asked softly. "What did you find?"

Li Shen hesitated. That alone was alarming.

"We confirmed something," he said finally. "But it's... not simple."

Fen Yu drifted down, hugging herself. "I don't like that place."

Wei Rong nodded grimly. "Shin Gu's chamber."

The Empress's fingers curled slightly. "What about it?"

Li Shen spoke carefully. "No ordinary ghost enters her courtyard. Not wandering spirits. Not servants who died in the palace. Not even resentful shadows."

Fen Yu whispered, "It feels... wrong. Like standing near a sealed grave."

Wei Rong added, "We tried approaching once. Just once. The pressure alone was enough to force us back. Not an exorcism. Not talismans."

The Empress's heart sank. "Then...?"

Li Shen met her gaze. "Non-human interference. Something that does not belong to the natural cycle of life and death."

Fen Yu shuddered. "Even ghosts avoid her."

Silence fell.

The Empress exhaled slowly. "So the kitchen story..."

Li Shen shook his head. "Convenient. Too convenient. A story designed to end questions, not answer them."

Wei Rong clenched his fists. "If Shin Gu is involved, she is hiding behind something powerful. Something ancient."

The Empress closed her eyes briefly.

So the ghosts were right.

So was her instinct.

3. A Dangerous Absence

"What worries me," Li Shen continued, "is not what we saw—but what we didn't."

The Empress looked up. "Explain."

"Ghosts observe everything," he said. "Accidents leave traces. Fear leaves echoes. Death leaves scars."

Fen Yu nodded vigorously. "Princess Zhi's fall should have screamed in the spirit realm. But there was nothing. Like it was... swallowed."

Wei Rong added, "As if something prevented the imprint from forming."

The Empress's voice dropped to a whisper. "A cultivator?"

"Or worse," Li Shen said quietly. "A hybrid."

The word hung in the air like a curse.

Ghost-human breeding.

The Empress remembered the shaman's warning. The blood moon. The cult in the north.

Her nails bit into her palm. "So Shin Gu may not even be fully human."

Fen Yu looked terrified. "No wonder she stared at us."

Wei Rong growled. "If she can see us—"

"Then she knows we are watching," the Empress finished.

4. The Emperor Begins to Doubt

Elsewhere, in his private study, the Emperor stared at the kitchen apology letters spread before him.

Four people.

All injured.

All consistent stories.

Too consistent.

He rubbed his temple.

If oil spilled during transport, why relocate the kitchen only that day?

Why no prior record?

Why no ghost disturbances—when accidents always left them?

He remembered the Empress's words.

"There are people suffering in your kingdom because of false charges. Because of silence."

His jaw tightened.

He summoned his shadow guard quietly. "I want full records of Shin Gu's arrival. Her origin. Her attendants. Every transfer approved by the Dowager."

The guard hesitated. "Your Majesty... those files are sealed."

"Then unseal them," the Emperor said coldly.

As the guard vanished into the darkness, the Emperor leaned back, eyes hard.

If this was a trap—

He would tear it open himself.

5. Lines Drawn in Silence

Back in the Empress's chamber, Fen Yu suddenly spoke, voice small.

"If she really is... not human... then Princess Zhi's baby..."

The Empress stiffened.

Li Shen finished the thought grimly. "May have been a sacrifice. Or a threat."

Wei Rong slammed his fist into the wall. "Then we are already late."

The Empress stood slowly, eyes burning.

"No," she said. "We are right on time."

She looked at the window, toward the distant palace wings where Shin Gu resided.

"She thinks we believe the kitchen story.

She thinks the Emperor is blind.

She thinks ghosts are afraid."

A slow, dangerous smile curved her lips.

"Let her."

Outside, the palace slept.

But beneath silk curtains and stone floors, the truth was stirring—and soon, it would demand blood, answers, or both.

The night was deep and soundless when the Emperor moved.

He did not wear his imperial robes. No jade crown, no dragon embroidery, no attendants following at a respectful distance. Tonight, he was only a man wrapped in dark cloth, slipping through shadows that knew him too well.

Shin Gu's courtyard lay in the eastern wing of the palace—quiet, secluded, guarded not by soldiers but by distance. Even lanterns burned lower there, as if the light itself hesitated.

The Emperor paused on the roof ridge, listening.

Nothing.

No voices. No footsteps. No whispers of servants. No disturbance in the air.

Too clean, he thought.

He dropped down soundlessly and approached the door. The lock yielded easily; it had been designed to keep out curiosity, not someone who ruled the palace.

Inside, the chamber was warm.

The scent of incense lingered—thick, sweet, calming. The kind meant to soothe the heart, slow the breath, still the mind. He frowned slightly. It wasn't unusual... yet something about it felt deliberate.

He stepped inside fully.

The room was immaculate.

No hidden talismans. No blood sigils. No cursed objects. No strange formations etched into the floor.

Only silk curtains, polished furniture, and at the far end of the room—

An altar.

The Emperor stopped.

On a low wooden table stood several small god idols: the God of Fertility, the Goddess of Mercy, the Ancestor Guardian, and a minor mountain deity worshipped by women praying for peaceful households.

Fresh incense sticks burned before them, smoke curling upward in thin, steady lines.

Offerings had been laid out carefully—fruit, rice, tea, and flowers changed daily.

Nothing excessive. Nothing dark. Nothing forbidden.

He stepped closer.

The idols were well cared for. No cracks. No stains. No signs of blood or ash from unorthodox rituals. The incense was high quality, not mixed with hallucinogenic herbs or soul-binding powder.

This... is orthodox worship.

His brows knitted.

If Shin Gu were hiding something, she was hiding it perfectly.

He checked behind the altar, under the table, beneath the floorboards. Still nothing. Not even a hidden compartment.

The chamber felt peaceful. Almost gentle.

He straightened slowly, unsettled—not relieved.

Because this proved nothing.

Finding evil would have been easy. Not finding it was far worse.

"She prays," he murmured to himself. "Or she wants others to believe she does."

His gaze lingered on the fertility idol.

Princess Zhi had lost her child.

Coincidence?

Or mockery?

The Emperor exhaled slowly and turned to leave.

As he stepped outside, the night air felt colder than before.

He didn't notice it immediately—

But somewhere behind him, an incense stick flickered.

Just once.

Outside the Courtyard

The Emperor walked several steps away before stopping.

Something tugged faintly at his instincts—not danger, not malice, but uncertainty. He turned his head slightly, glancing back at the silent courtyard.

"Good or bad..." he murmured, voice low.

"I still cannot tell."

That disturbed him more than certainty ever could.

If Shin Gu was innocent, then the palace itself had become dangerous in another way—because the truth was still hidden.

If she was guilty...

Then she was patient. Careful. And far more dangerous than he had imagined.

He pulled his cloak tighter and vanished back into the darkness, carrying more questions than answers.

And behind closed doors, unseen by human eyes—

A woman opened her eyes in the dark.

Shin Gu lay still on her bed, lips curved faintly, as if listening to something only she could hear.

The incense continued to burn.

Steady. Quiet. Perfect.