

## **Ghost 182**

Chapter 182: shadow at dawn

Morning arrived quietly, but fear arrived faster.

Before the sun had fully risen above the palace roofs, hurried footsteps echoed through the Dowager Empress's courtyard. Servants whispered nervously, bowls of medicinal soup clinked, and the scent of strong herbs hung heavy in the air.

The Dowager Empress lay on her bed, face flushed unnaturally red, lips dry, hair damp with sweat. Her breath came unevenly, and her fingers clutched the silk sheets as though they were the only thing anchoring her to this world.

The Emperor arrived in haste, his robes barely straightened, followed closely by the imperial healer.

"Mother," he said, voice low but tense. "What happened?"

The Dowager's eyes snapped open at the sound of his voice. Fear—raw, unmistakable fear—filled them.

"Shadow..." she whispered hoarsely. "I saw shadows last night."

The healer paused mid-bow.

The Emperor's spine stiffened.

"Shadows?" he repeated.

The Dowager swallowed with difficulty. "They spoke. They laughed. They moved without bodies. I... I could not move. I could not breathe."

Her hands trembled violently.

"This has never happened before," she said, voice cracking. "Never. Even during wars... even during plagues... I have never been afraid like this."

The healer carefully checked her pulse, his brows knitting together.

"Your Grace has a very high fever," he said slowly. "But there is no sign of poison. No illness I can immediately identify."

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

A shadow that speaks.

A presence unseen.

Fear without physical cause.

His mind immediately went to Princess Zhi.

To the oil.

To the lake.

To the strange pull that had almost dragged the Empress into the water.

Is it the same person?

He clenched his fists.

"Mother," he said firmly, "rest. I will ask monks to come immediately. High-ranking ones."

The Dowager's grip tightened on his sleeve. "Do not let it come back."

His jaw set. "It won't."

He straightened and turned to leave orders—only to pause as Lady Chen entered the room.

She looked genuinely concerned, her steps hurried, her expression soft.

"Your Majesty," she said gently, "I heard the Dowager Empress was unwell."

Her eyes flicked to the bed, then back to him.

"You look troubled."

The Emperor exhaled slowly. "Something... unusual happened last night."

Lady Chen placed a reassuring hand over her chest. "Please don't worry. I will personally stay and look after Her Grace."

The Dowager nodded weakly. "Let her stay."

The Emperor hesitated for a fraction of a second, then nodded. "Very well."

As he left, palace servants bowed deeply, fear already spreading through their whispers.

By noon, the entire palace knew.

The Dowager Empress had seen shadows.

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Fear Spreads Like Ink

Rumors moved faster than truth.

By mid-morning, servants walked in pairs. Guards tightened patrols. Even birds seemed quieter in the palace gardens.

Some whispered it was a curse.

Others said an angry spirit had entered the palace.

Some muttered about karma.

And somewhere far from the Dowager's courtyard, Lian An sat quietly with crochet needles in hand.

Her fingers moved with far more confidence now.

Where once the yarn tangled and knots formed unevenly, now the stitches flowed smoothly, the pattern emerging neatly beneath her touch. Three days of pain, scolding, and stubborn perseverance had paid off.

She exhaled softly, almost proud.

"I'm not terrible anymore," she murmured.

Fen Yu hovered nearby, arms folded, eyes darting nervously toward the window.

Wei Rong stood stiffly beside the pillar, unusually silent.

Li Shen stared at the floor, deep in thought.

The Empress glanced up.

"...Why do you all look like you're attending a funeral?"

No one answered.

Before she could press further, footsteps sounded outside.

Princess Zhi entered, pale but composed, her posture careful as she walked. She carried a small bundle of silk in her hands.

"Zhi," Lian An said immediately, setting aside her work. "You should be resting."

Princess Zhi smiled faintly. "I am. But... I wanted to see you."

They sat together near the window, sunlight warming the cushions.

"I heard about the Dowager Empress," Princess Zhi said quietly.

Lian An's fingers paused. "You did?"

She nodded. "The whole palace knows. She has a high fever... and claims she saw shadows."

Her voice dropped. "It's frightening."

Lian An felt a strange chill crawl up her spine.

"Be careful at night," Princess Zhi added gently. "Don't walk alone. Don't go near the lake."

Lian An forced a calm smile. "I will."

Princess Zhi hesitated, then lifted the silk bundle. "I'm preparing handkerchief embroidery for the festival."

She unfolded it slightly—delicate patterns, precise stitches, elegant and refined.

"You're amazing," Lian An said honestly.

Princess Zhi shook her head. "I just... need something to focus on."

After a moment, she stood. "I should go."

Lian An walked her to the door, watching her retreating figure with concern.

When the door closed, silence fell.

Slowly, Lian An turned back toward her chamber.

Her gaze landed on the three ghosts.

They were staring at her.

All three.

Wide-eyed. Stiff. Guilty.

"...What?" Lian An asked slowly.

Fen Yu swallowed. "Nothing."

Wei Rong coughed. "Why would anything be wrong?"

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves too quickly. "Coincidence."

Lian An narrowed her eyes.

"You're lying," she said flatly. "All three of you."

Fen Yu broke first. "We—"

Wei Rong snapped, "We did nothing permanent."

Li Shen added, "It was supposed to be harmless."

Lian An's crochet slipped from her hands.

"...What did you do?"

The three exchanged looks.

Fen Yu whispered, "If you scold us, we'll accept it."

Wei Rong nodded solemnly.

Li Shen sighed. "But... please listen first."

Lian An closed her eyes slowly.

A Dowager with fever.

Shadows at night.

Three ghosts acting like children caught stealing sweets.

She opened her eyes.

"...Explain," she said very calmly.

They did.

About the courtyard.

The lantern.

The shadows.

The screams.

Silence followed.

Absolute silence.

Then—

Lian An pressed her fingers to her temples.

"...I leave you alone for ONE NIGHT."

Fen Yu winced. "She deserved a little scare."

Wei Rong added quickly, "We didn't touch her."

Li Shen nodded. "No lasting harm."

Lian An lowered her hands and stared at them.

"You terrified the most powerful woman in the palace," she said slowly. "Do you understand what kind of consequences that brings?"

Fen Yu shrank. "We... didn't think—"

"That's the problem," Lian An snapped.

She stood abruptly. "If the Emperor connects this to Princess Zhi's case—"

Wei Rong stiffened. "He already suspects something."

Li Shen murmured, "This may accelerate things."

Lian An exhaled sharply.

Then she paused.

"...But."

They looked up.

"If the Dowager truly saw shadows," Lian An said quietly, "then that means..."

Fen Yu whispered, "She's sensitive."

Wei Rong nodded. "Or something else in the palace is reacting."

Li Shen's eyes sharpened. "Which means... we're closer to the truth."

Lian An's anger softened into worry.

"...Next time," she said firmly, "you tell me before doing something like this."

All three nodded in unison.

"Yes," they said together.

She picked up her crochet again, hands slightly trembling.

Outside, the palace buzzed with fear.

Inside, truth moved closer—quietly, invisibly, and far more dangerously than anyone realized.

And somewhere in the Dowager Empress's fevered dreams, shadows waited.

The palace had not felt this heavy in years.

Even as morning sunlight spilled across the jade tiles and gilded rooftops, the air remained tense, as though something unseen lingered between the pillars and corridors. Servants moved quietly, heads lowered. Guards tightened their grips on spears they had held for decades without fear—yet today, their palms were damp.

Inside the Emperor's study, incense burned steadily, but its calming fragrance did little to ease his mind.

He sat behind his desk, fingers interlocked, gaze unfocused.

Shadows.

Not assassins. Not poison. Not rebellion.

Shadows that spoke. Shadows that frightened the Dowager Empress into fever.

This was not something politics or military force could solve.

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

Ever since Princess Zhi's accident, things had been spiraling beyond reason. Oil appearing where no one saw it poured. A woman nearly walking into the lake as if pulled by invisible strings. Ghostly fear creeping into the heart of the palace itself.

And now his mother—strong-willed, sharp-tongued, fearless—was shaking like a frightened child.

Something was very wrong.

"Your Majesty."

The Emperor opened his eyes. General Xie stood before him, posture straight, expression grave.

"You summoned me?"

"Yes," the Emperor replied, voice low. "Sit."

The general obeyed immediately, though unease flickered across his face. He had served this Emperor for years—through wars, coups, and court intrigue. This tension was different.

The Emperor rose from his seat and walked toward the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"General," he said slowly, "have you ever encountered something you could not explain? Not with reason. Not with logic."

General Xie hesitated.

"I... have faced strange situations on the battlefield," he answered carefully. "But never anything I could not eventually understand."

The Emperor gave a humorless smile.

"I wish that were still true."

He turned back, eyes sharp. "My mother saw shadows last night. They spoke to her. They moved without form."

The general's breath caught.

"Shadows... in the palace?"

"Yes."

"And the healer?" the general asked.

"Found no illness. No poison. Only fear."

Silence stretched between them.

Finally, the general spoke again, voice lower. "Your Majesty... are you certain this is not someone using illusion techniques? Or forbidden arts?"

"That is exactly what I don't know," the Emperor replied. "And that uncertainty is what worries me."

He returned to his desk and rested his palms on its surface.

"Princess Zhi's accident already raised too many unanswered questions. Now this." His jaw tightened. "These events are connected. I am certain of it."

The general nodded slowly. "If that is the case... then ordinary investigation may not be enough."

The Emperor met his gaze. "That is why I am calling you."

He straightened. "Go to Mount Yunhe. Bring the senior monks from the Temple of Silent Dawn."

The general's eyes widened slightly.

"The Silent Dawn Temple?" he repeated. "Those monks rarely leave their mountain. They do not involve themselves in court matters."

"I know," the Emperor said. "That is precisely why I want them."

He lowered his voice. "If something unnatural is happening in my palace, I want eyes that can see beyond what we can. I want answers, not rumors."

The general stood immediately and clasped his fists. "I will go myself."

"Good." The Emperor paused, then added, "Discretion is crucial. No announcement. No escort large enough to draw attention."

"I understand."

As the general turned to leave, the Emperor spoke again.

"One more thing."

The general stopped.

"If the monks confirm that something... unclean is present," the Emperor said quietly, "I want to know whether it threatens the royal bloodline."

The general's expression hardened. "I will not allow harm to come to the imperial family."

The Emperor nodded. "Nor will I."

When the general departed, the Emperor remained standing alone in the study.

The incense smoke curled upward, twisting and fading into nothing.

For the first time since ascending the throne, he felt a strange unease—not for his rule, but for the people closest to him.

Princess Zhi. His mother. And—

His thoughts drifted, unbidden, to Lian An.

She had almost walked into the lake. She had sensed danger before anyone else. And somehow... every strange event seemed to orbit her.

He clenched his fist.

No.

He refused to suspect her.

But he could not ignore that she stood at the center of this storm.

Outside, the palace bell rang, slow and solemn.

Somewhere far beyond the walls, monks were being summoned.

And whether the palace was ready or not, the unseen was about to be dragged into the light.