

## Ghost 103

### Chapter 103: man clothes

By the time the morning sunlight reached the western courtyards, the palace had already turned the previous night's scandal into a memory polished smooth with gossip. Ministers who had trembled hours ago now laughed again. Courtiers, relieved to be alive and favored, busied themselves writing polite letters of apology that said everything except what they truly meant.

Inside the Empress's quarters, the air smelled faintly of incense and jasmine. The chaos of yesterday's gifts had been cleared. Boxes now sat in orderly stacks against the wall, sealed and labeled, as if they had never been born of shame. The kittens slept in a silk basket, tiny paws twitching, dreaming of ribbons.

Lian An sat near the window, reading through one of the minister's letters — though her expression suggested she was thinking of anything else.

When her maid, Xiaoyu, entered carrying two long gift boxes, she raised her eyes. "Your Majesty, these are the ones you said to set aside for Princess Zhi and Prince Liang."

"Good." The Empress set the letter aside and gestured for her to bring them closer.

The boxes were wrapped in pale green silk, tied with gold-thread cord. Each bore a delicate jade seal in the shape of a phoenix feather — subtle, elegant, unmistakably from her hand.

"Deliver them to the Princess's courtyard," Lian An said. "Say it's a token of thanks. Without their words last night, I'd still be standing trial by whispers."

Xiaoyu hesitated. "Should we write a note?"

Lian An shook her head. "No. Words draw attention. Let the gifts speak."

The maid bowed. "As you command."

She turned and left, her footsteps light against the polished wood floors. Outside, the air was cool and bright — sunlight filtering through the garden trees, birds perched on the stone railing. When Xiaoyu reached the courtyard of Princess Zhi, she paused for a moment, watching.

The princess was seated beneath the shade of a pear tree, her pale robe fluttering softly in the wind. Prince Liang stood nearby, reading a letter aloud — his voice calm, even, his presence quiet but powerful.

When Xiaoyu entered and bowed low, Princess Zhi turned with a smile that reached her eyes.

"These are from Her Majesty," Xiaoyu said respectfully, offering the boxes. "She sends them as thanks to Your Highness and the Prince."

Zhi's smile softened. "Her Majesty has a noble heart. Tell her... we only did what was right."

Xiaoyu bowed again. "I will."

As she left, she saw the princess turn to her husband, murmuring something that made his expression ease — the faintest smile flickering across the usually cold lines of his face.

It was a quiet scene — loyalty repaid without spectacle.

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When Xiaoyu returned to the Empress's chamber, she found her mistress sitting with a letter open in her hands. Her expression was unreadable, her lips pressed together in thought.

"Your Majesty?" the maid asked carefully.

Lian An lifted the parchment slightly. The writing was small, hurried — not the elegant script of courtiers, but the practiced hand of someone used to ledgers and kitchen lists.

"It's from the manager of my restaurant," she said quietly.

Xiaoyu blinked. "The whisper bowl? The one outside the southern gate?"

"Yes." The Empress's eyes darkened, scanning the lines again. "They haven't explained anything specific. The message simply says there is something urgent and asks me to come as soon as possible. There are no details."

She folded the letter, resting it on the table. "They wouldn't risk sending something like this unless it needs me."

Xiaoyu frowned. "What will Your Majesty do?"

"I can't go in daylight. The Dowager will hear of it before I leave the gates." Lian An rose and began pacing slowly, thinking aloud. "If I send someone else, they might be followed. And if it's a trap—" She stopped, her fingers tightening around the letter. "Then I'd rather meet it myself."

The maid looked alarmed. "You can't go out of the palace alone!"

The Empress gave a small, humorless smile. "Do you think I haven't before?"

That silenced Xiaoyu for a moment. She had been with her mistress for years, but every time she thought she knew all her secrets, the Empress found a new shadow to step through.

Finally, Lian An said, "Prepare men's clothing. A guard's uniform, plain. Something I can move in."

Xiaoyu's eyes widened. "Men's—Your Majesty!"

"You heard me," the Empress said calmly. "You'll wear my night robe and say I'm resting if anyone comes. Tell the outer servants not to let anyone in."

The maid wrung her hands. "But if someone finds out—"

"Then they'll find you drinking tea in my chair and think I'm asleep." Lian An's tone softened slightly. "You've never failed me, Xiaoyu. Don't start now."

The maid bowed deeply, voice trembling. "Yes, Your Majesty."

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That night, the palace slumbered under a silver moon.

The last patrol had passed. Torches burned low in their brackets. A night wind slipped through the corridors like a whisper no one dared answer.

Inside the Empress's chamber, shadows moved.

Xiaoyu stood beside the dressing screen, holding out a folded set of clothing. "It's from one of the guards," she whispered nervously. "I washed the crest off. No one will recognize it."

The Empress stepped out from behind the screen wearing a simple linen undershirt. Her hair was braided tightly and pinned beneath a dark cap. The moment she began to dress, her posture changed — straighter, looser, as if the weight of rank had been replaced by the ease of freedom.

The maid's hands trembled as she helped her tie the belt.

When Lian An emerged, fully dressed, the transformation was startling.

The uniform was plain gray, the fit a little loose, but her figure carried it effortlessly. The straight lines of the collar framed her delicate jaw, the faint curve of her mouth softened by shadow. Her eyes — clear, dark, fearless — gleamed beneath the lamplight.

If not for the faint scent of jasmine still clinging to her, she could have passed for a young nobleman or scholar — the kind whose smile made strangers curious and uneasy at once.

"Your Majesty," Xiaoyu whispered, half in awe. "You look..."

"Handsome?" Lian An said dryly, adjusting the collar.

The maid blushed. "I was going to say reckless."

Lian An smiled, a quick flash of teeth. "Both can be true."

She pulled on black gloves, tucking the letter inside her belt. "Remember," she said, turning serious again, "no one enters the courtyard. If anyone asks, I'm ill. You'll say I refused to see even the Dowager."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good. Lock the outer gate behind me."

Lian An glanced to the side — and indeed, in the reflection of the bronze mirror, three faint shapes shimmered into view.

Wei Rong, ever the soldier, bowed stiffly. "We'll clear the path."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, half-transparent, already calculating. "I can delay the patrol at the west watchtower."

Fen Yu spun midair, eyes bright with delight. "Finally! A midnight adventure. And you look so adorable in that uniform."

Lian An sighed. "Just make sure I don't end up in the dungeon."

Fen Yu giggled. "Please, Your Majesty — if you end up in the dungeon, we'll haunt every guard who looks at you twice."

Xiaoyu pressed her hands together nervously. "Please be careful, your majesty"

The Empress rested a hand briefly on the girl's shoulder. "Always."

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Moments later, the window lattice creaked open.

Cold night air slipped in, carrying the scent of wet stone and garden blossoms.

Lian An climbed lightly onto the sill, glanced once back at the sleeping kittens curled beside the lantern, and jumped.

She landed soundlessly in the courtyard below, knees bending, the hem of her borrowed uniform brushing the grass. The moon painted her in silver. For a heartbeat, she was no longer an empress — only a shadow in the dark, young and fearless.

Ahead, the corridor stretched silent. Two guards stood at the far gate, their torches glowing dim.

Then — a sudden noise to the left.

A whisper of laughter, faint as wind in a flute.

The guards turned their heads, startled. A lantern down the path flickered, then rose into the air — floating, spinning once, twice, like a will-o'-the-wisp before crashing harmlessly against a wall.

"What—" one guard muttered, running toward it.

The other followed.

By the time they reached the spot, nothing remained but the smell of smoke.

But that was only the beginning.

Fen Yu, delighted by her success, whispered, "Let's make it more fun!"

Before anyone could stop her, she drifted toward the barracks water jar and tipped it over — spilling a river of water that crawled toward the guards' boots.

They slipped spectacularly, shouting.

Wei Rong groaned like a disapproving elder. "You call that subtle?"

"Oh, hush," Fen Yu grinned, floating upside down. "Subtlety is boring."

Meanwhile, Li Shen, the scholar, took a different approach. He waved his ghostly brush through the air, tracing invisible characters that shimmered faintly blue — 'Inspection at the main gate!'

The words glowed for a breath before fading into the night wind.

The captain of the patrol, half asleep on duty, blinked up at the message that had briefly appeared over his head and panicked. "Inspection? Now?! Move, you fools!"

Half the guards grabbed their spears and ran toward the front gate.

By the time confusion spread fully through the courtyard, the Empress was already a blur of gray and shadow, slipping between torchlight and moonlight, moving like a sigh given human form.

Fen Yu followed last, snickering as she left one final gift: a torch floating midair that saluted the stunned guards before dropping neatly back into its stand.

"Good teamwork," Li Shen murmured, satisfied. "Now, maybe next time we aim for less chaos."

"Chaos worked, didn't it?" Fen Yu said, winking.

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "If the Empress gets caught, I'm haunting you."

Fen Yu blew him a kiss. "Then haunt me beautifully."

Their laughter — one low, one bright, one barely audible — faded as they disappeared beyond the outer wall.

And the Empress, already on the road beyond the palace gates, did not look back.

The moon watched her go — a pale coin tossed by fate — as the city of night opened its arms to receive her.

Somewhere deep in its labyrinth of lanterns and whispers, the whisper bowl awaited her arrival.