

Ghost 183

Chapter 183: the one who walk between air

The road to Sacred Mount Yunhe was quiet, wrapped in mist and pine-scented air.

General Xie rode at the front of the small escort, his expression stern, his thoughts heavy. He had been to battlefields soaked in blood, had stood before armies ten times his size without fear—but this journey felt different. The Emperor's words echoed in his mind.

Something unnatural.

As the carriage climbed higher, the world seemed to grow still. Birds fell silent. Even the wind softened, as if unwilling to disturb the mountain.

At last, the gates of the Temple of Silent Dawn appeared—ancient stone carved with symbols so old their meanings had been lost to time. Young monks in plain robes swept the courtyard, their movements calm, their faces serene.

General Xie dismounted and stepped forward.

"I seek an audience," he said, bowing with proper respect. "By imperial order."

The students paused. One of them, barely more than twenty, folded his hands and nodded.

"Please wait."

He disappeared into the inner sanctum.

Inside the deepest hall, incense burned without flame.

A man sat in the air itself.

Not floating wildly, not supported by visible force—simply existing above the ground as naturally as breathing. His robes were simple, ash-gray, untouched by dust. His beard flowed down his chest like a silver river, and his eyes were closed, expression peaceful.

The student knelt.

"Master," he said softly. "The Emperor has summoned you to the palace."

The monk opened his eyes.

They were deep, unfathomable, reflecting something far older than the mountain itself.

"So," the monk murmured, voice calm, resonant. "The palace has begun to stir."

He lowered himself gently, feet touching stone without sound.

"Prepare the carriage."

General Xie bowed deeply when the monk emerged.

"Master," he said respectfully.

The monk studied him for a long moment, then smiled faintly.

"You carry worry like armor," he said. "It will not protect you from what awaits—but it will keep you standing."

He turned to his students.

"Guard the temple. Do not leave the mountain until I return."

They bowed in unison.

The journey back passed in silence.

The monk sat in meditation, eyes closed, while the carriage rolled onward. The closer they drew to the capital, the heavier the air became. Even the horses grew restless.

When the palace gates finally opened, the monk opened his eyes.

"So many threads," he murmured. "Twisted together."

Inside the palace, news of the monk's arrival spread quickly—though quietly. No drums announced him. No proclamation followed. Only whispers.

Lady Chen stood at the entrance of the Dowager Empress's courtyard when the carriage stopped.

She bowed gracefully.

"Master," she said, voice gentle. "Thank you for coming."

The monk looked at her.

Just one glance.

Lady Chen felt a sudden chill crawl up her spine, as if her thoughts had been brushed by unseen fingers.

He did not return her greeting.

Instead, he turned away.

"I will not begin here," he said.

Without another word, he walked past her, leaving Lady Chen frozen where she stood, smile stiff on her face.

Inside the Dowager Empress's chamber, the air was thick with incense and unease. The Dowager lay resting, her face pale, her breathing uneven.

The monk stepped inside, paused for only a heartbeat—

Then shook his head.

"No," he said quietly.

He turned and walked back out.

Lady Chen hurried after him, confusion breaking through her composure.

"Master—should you not examine Her Majesty first?"

He stopped in the courtyard.

"The sickness here is not rooted in the body," he said. "Nor does it begin in this room."

He lifted his gaze, eyes scanning the palace grounds.

"I must walk."

And so he did.

The monk walked through the palace courtyards slowly, deliberately.

Where he passed, the air shifted.

Wind stirred where there had been none. Leaves trembled. Birds took flight.

He paused beneath old trees, beside ponds, near corridors where servants hurried past without daring to look at him.

In one courtyard, he stopped.

His gaze lingered on the ground.

"Residual fear," he murmured. "Not old... recent."

He continued.

At another corner, he frowned.

"Here... intent. Strong, but hidden."

General Xie followed closely, heart pounding.

"Master," he asked quietly, "what is happening in the palace?"

The monk did not answer immediately.

Instead, he stepped onto a stone path and closed his eyes.

The world seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

"A door has been opened," the monk said at last. "Not fully. Not yet. But enough for things to pass through."

The general's blood ran cold.

"Ghosts?"

The monk opened his eyes.

"Something worse," he replied. "Something that pretends."

They reached the edge of a courtyard—one that felt strangely quiet, despite its beauty.

The monk stopped abruptly.

His expression changed.

For the first time since leaving the mountain, a trace of seriousness entered his eyes.

"Interesting," he said softly.

General Xie followed his gaze—but saw nothing unusual. Just stone paths, flowers, shadows cast by pillars.

"Master?" he asked.

The monk smiled faintly.

"There are eyes watching us," he said. "They are careful. They do not wish to be seen."

He turned back toward the palace interior.

"Summon the Emperor," he instructed. "Tell him the palace is not yet lost—but it is no longer clean."

General Xie bowed deeply.

"Yes, Master."

As the general hurried away, the monk remained standing alone in the courtyard, robes stirring in a breeze that had not existed moments before.

He looked toward the deeper halls of the palace.

"Whoever you are," he murmured, voice barely louder than the wind,

"you have stayed hidden for too long."

Somewhere unseen, something stirred.

And the game had truly begun.

Words by the Lake

The Emperor was deep in work when General Xie arrived.

Scrolls lay spread across the desk—reports from the northern borders, accounts from the treasury, petitions from the people. Ink stained the Emperor's fingers, but his mind was elsewhere. Even while reading, his thoughts drifted—to the palace, to the unrest, to the things that refused to fit neatly into reason.

General Xie knelt.

"Your Majesty," he said solemnly. "The monk from Sacred Mount Yunhe has arrived. He requests an audience."

The Emperor's hand paused mid-stroke.

"So soon," he murmured.

He stood at once. "Take me to him."

They walked through the palace corridors without ceremony. Servants bowed and stepped aside, sensing the gravity of the moment. The Emperor did not slow his stride until they reached the lakeside.

The water was calm, reflecting the sky like polished glass.

The monk stood there alone.

Ash-gray robes fluttered faintly in the breeze, his back straight, his presence quiet yet overwhelming. He gazed at the lake as if it were speaking to him.

The Emperor stopped several steps away.

This place...

His jaw tightened.

It was here—right here—that the Empress had nearly walked into the water, her eyes empty, her steps unsteady, as though something unseen had been guiding her.

The memory still sent a chill down his spine.

The monk turned.

Their eyes met.

The Emperor inclined his head respectfully. "Master."

The monk returned the gesture, calm and composed. "Your Majesty."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the faint ripple of water.

Then the Emperor asked, without preamble, "My mother. How is she?"

The monk's expression softened slightly.

"The Dowager Empress is fine," he said. "Her fever has broken. What she experienced was a disturbance of the spirit, not the body. A bad dream—nothing more."

The Emperor exhaled, a tension he hadn't realized he was holding easing from his chest.

"But—" the monk continued.

The Emperor's eyes sharpened. "But?"

The monk turned his gaze back to the lake.

"There is something in this palace that does not belong," he said slowly. "Something powerful. Something patient."

The wind stirred, sending ripples across the water.

"It is not attacking openly," the monk went on. "It is sowing confusion. Turning people against one another. Creating chaos not just within these walls, but with the potential to spill into the entire kingdom."

The Emperor clenched his fist at his side.

"Can you identify it?" he asked. "Can you remove it?"

The monk shook his head.

"Not yet. It hides well. It wears familiarity like a cloak. Even I cannot point to it directly without consequence."

The Emperor's voice lowered. "Is it... related to what happened to the Empress? To Princess Zhi?"

The monk looked at him carefully.

"This lake," he said quietly, "has felt unnatural influence. A guiding force. Subtle. Dangerous."

The Emperor's breath hitched.

"So I was right," he muttered. "Someone—or something—was trying to push her."

"Yes," the monk said. "And the same force touched Princess Zhi's path."

The Emperor turned away, staring into the water.

"How long?" he asked. "How long has this been happening?"

The monk folded his hands into his sleeves.

"Long enough that it has grown confident. But not long enough that it cannot be stopped."

He met the Emperor's gaze again.

"You must be careful, Your Majesty. Trust fewer people. Watch more. Do not rush. The moment it realizes it has been discovered, it will either retreat—or strike."

The Emperor nodded slowly.

"I understand."

The monk inclined his head. "I will remain in the palace for now. Watching. Listening."

As he turned to leave, he paused and added softly,

"Protect the Empress. She stands closer to the center of this storm than anyone realizes."

The monk walked away, robes whispering against stone.

The Emperor remained by the lake, fists clenched, eyes dark.

A powerful force in his palace.

Hidden. Calculating. Dangerous.

And this time, he knew—

This was not something he could ignore.

Not as an Emperor.

And not as a husband.