

Ghost 184

Chapter 184: whisper beneath the palace

Night had already deepened when the Emperor turned his steps toward the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

The palace lamps glowed softly, casting long shadows across the stone paths. Everything looked peaceful on the surface, yet the Emperor felt a persistent unease—like something unseen was watching from behind the walls.

Inside the courtyard, the atmosphere was calm but restrained.

The Dowager Empress sat upright on her couch, wrapped in a light shawl. Her color had returned, and her breathing was steady. Beside her, Lady Chen personally poured tea, her movements gentle and attentive, as if afraid even a careless sound might disturb the fragile balance of the night.

When the Emperor entered, both women looked up.

"You've come, Your Majesty," Lady Chen said softly.

The Emperor nodded and stepped closer. "Mother, are you feeling better?"

The Dowager Empress waved her hand lightly. "Much better. The fever has gone. It truly felt like a nightmare... but one that lingered even after I woke."

Her eyes darkened as she spoke.

Lady Chen added in a low voice, "Your Majesty, even before the Dowager Empress fell ill, I felt something strange. Sudden chills. A sense of heaviness. I've lived in the palace for years—this has never happened before."

The Emperor's gaze sharpened. "So you felt it as well."

Both women looked at him intently.

The Dowager Empress straightened. "What are you implying?"

The Emperor exhaled slowly. "Since Princess Zhi's miscarriage, unusual things have been happening. At first, I thought they were unrelated... but now I am certain they are not."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened around her teacup.

The Dowager Empress's voice dropped. "You believe Princess Zhi's miscarriage was not an accident?"

"Yes," the Emperor replied without hesitation.

A heavy silence fell.

The Dowager Empress closed her eyes briefly. "I knew it. That child was nearly full-term. Losing it so suddenly... it never felt right."

Lady Chen nodded slowly. "I also thought so. Ever since that day, the palace feels colder. As if something is moving beneath the calm."

The Emperor hesitated for a moment, then spoke again, his voice grave.

"There is more."

Both women stiffened.

"On the day after Princess Zhi's miscarriage," the Emperor said, "I saw the Empress near the lake."

Lady Chen looked up sharply. "Near the lake?"

"Yes." His brows furrowed. "Her eyes were empty. Completely blank. She did not respond when I called her. She walked forward as if controlled by something—straight toward the water."

The Dowager Empress's face paled. "Are you saying—"

"If I had not reached her in time," the Emperor finished quietly, "she would have drowned."

Lady Chen covered her mouth in shock.

"That... that sounds like possession," she whispered.

"That was my thought as well," the Emperor said. "When I questioned her later, she had no memory of walking there."

The Dowager Empress's hands trembled slightly. "This palace has always had secrets, but this... this is something far darker."

The Emperor nodded. "That is why I summoned the monk."

Both women turned to him.

"The monk confirmed it," he continued. "He said your illness was not caused by natural means. It was the result of a disturbance—something powerful operating within the palace."

Lady Chen shivered. "Dark arts..."

"Yes," the Emperor replied. "Someone is using forbidden methods. Carefully. Quietly. Creating chaos without leaving obvious traces."

The Dowager Empress clenched her fist. "So Princess Zhi's miscarriage, my illness, and the Empress nearly drowning... all connected."

"Exactly," the Emperor said. "And whoever is behind this is still here."

Lady Chen swallowed hard. "Could it be someone close to us?"

"Anyone could be," the Emperor answered. "From now on, everyone is under watch. No one is above suspicion."

The Dowager Empress took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. "Then we cannot sit idle. If darkness has already entered the palace, we must counter it."

She looked at the Emperor decisively. "Invite spiritual practitioners into the palace. Monks, Taoists, exorcists—give them official duties. Even if it only weakens whatever is lurking, it is better than doing nothing."

The Emperor considered her words, then nodded. "I agree."

Lady Chen added softly, "If darkness is spreading, then light must be gathered."

The Dowager Empress leaned back against the cushions, her gaze distant and thoughtful. "Ever since the Empress returned... nothing has been peaceful."

The Emperor's eyes flickered at that, but he said nothing.

Instead, he stood. "For now, everyone must be vigilant. Do not wander at night. Do not trust calm appearances."

He looked at both women firmly. "Whatever is hiding in this palace, I will uncover it."

As he left the courtyard, the lanterns swayed gently in the night breeze.

The palace remained silent—but beneath that silence, something unseen stirred, aware now that it had drawn the Emperor's full attention.

And the game in the shadows had truly begun.

Orders in the Dark

The Emperor stepped out of the Dowager Empress's courtyard, his expression calm but his mind sharp with resolve.

The night air felt heavier than before.

At the edge of the path, the General stood waiting, hands clasped behind his back, posture straight. One look at the Emperor's face told him this was not a casual summons.

"Your Majesty," the General said quietly.

The Emperor stopped beneath the lantern light. Its glow cut hard shadows across his features.

"I am issuing a new order," he said without preamble. "Listen carefully."

The General straightened further. "This subordinate is listening."

"Immediately begin recruiting spiritual practitioners," the Emperor commanded.

"Monks, Taoists, exorcists—those with proven cultivation and clean reputations."

The General's eyes narrowed slightly in surprise but he did not interrupt.

"They will be stationed inside the palace," the Emperor continued.

"They will receive official appointments, monthly stipends, and lodging."

The General nodded. "Understood."

"They are to perform daily purification rituals," the Emperor said, his voice firm.

"Morning and night. All major courtyards, especially the inner palace, lake paths, ancestral halls, and women's quarters."

A pause.

"And they will observe," the Emperor added. "Quietly. Anyone who reacts strangely, resists purification, or shows discomfort—report it to me alone."

The General's expression hardened. "Your Majesty suspects something is hiding among us."

"Yes," the Emperor said. "And it is patient."

He looked toward the dark stretch of palace roofs. "This is not to alarm the court. Publicly, these practitioners are here to pray for blessings and prepare for the upcoming festival."

The General bowed deeply. "This subordinate understands. I will personally oversee the selection."

"Good," the Emperor replied. "Speed is essential, but discretion even more so."

The General hesitated, then spoke carefully. "Your Majesty... does this order relate to Princess Zhi's incident?"

The Emperor's gaze sharpened. "It relates to everything."

That was all he said.

The General lowered his head. "This subordinate will not fail."

As the General departed to carry out the command, the Emperor remained where he was for a long moment, listening to the faint sounds of the sleeping palace.

Monks.

Exorcists.

Purification rituals.

If darkness truly lurked within these walls, then it would soon find nowhere left to hide.

And if it dared to move—

He would be waiting.

A Quiet Fear Beneath the Lanterns

The palace had already fallen into silence when the Emperor turned his steps toward the Empress's courtyard.

The lanterns along the stone path swayed gently in the night breeze, casting long shadows that stretched and tangled like restless thoughts. With every step, his chest felt heavier.

That day by the lake...

The memory refused to fade.

Her eyes had been empty.

Not frightened.

Not confused.

Just... absent.

Like a puppet whose strings had been pulled by unseen hands.

Even now, recalling it sent a chill crawling up his spine.

He had seen war, rebellion, betrayal—but that moment had frightened him more than all of it combined.

Because it was her.

And because whatever had done that... was powerful.

He stopped at the entrance of her courtyard.

The guard bowed quickly, but the Emperor barely noticed. His gaze was already fixed on the softly lit windows inside.

She had cultivated.

Not alone.

With him.

With her friend.

With Wei Jie.

With Yao Qing.

With the twins—Lin Yue and Lin Chen.

He knew how strong they had become. He had felt it during their enlightenment, during the clash with the barbaric clan.

Lian An was no longer fragile.

Yet even so...

That thing was stronger.

And worse—

It knew things it should not.

The Emperor's fingers tightened slightly at his side.

Human-ghost breeding.

That secret alone was enough to destroy dynasties.

And only a handful of people knew:

Him.

The Empress.

Wei Jie.

Yao Qing.

The twins.

No court official.

No minister.

No monk.

If this darkness had already reached the palace... then it meant one terrifying truth—

Someone, or something, was moving far ahead of them.

He stepped inside.

The familiar scent of herbs and incense greeted him. It calmed his heart—just a little.

Inside, the Empress sat near the window, a small lamp beside her. She was stitching quietly, her posture relaxed, her expression peaceful.

Too peaceful.

For a moment, the Emperor simply stood there and watched.

She looked normal.

Alive.

Warm.

Real.

His breath finally eased.

"Why are you standing there like a thief?" she said without looking up. "Come in."

He smiled faintly and stepped forward.

"You should be resting," he said. "It's late."

She glanced at him. "And you should stop worrying so much. Your eyebrows are going to freeze that way."

Despite himself, he let out a soft breath of laughter.

Then his gaze darkened.

"I came because I was worried."

Her hand paused.

Slowly, she put the stitching aside and looked at him fully.

"...About the lake?" she asked quietly.

He nodded.

"That day," he said, his voice low, "when I saw you walking toward the water... I felt something cold wrap around my heart."

He stepped closer.

"You were strong. I know that. You've cultivated. You're sharper, faster, more aware than before."

His jaw tightened.

"But whatever controlled you... it didn't care."

The Empress's eyes dimmed slightly.

"I know," she said. "That's what scares me too."

Silence settled between them.

Then he spoke again, slower this time.

"We know about human-ghost breeding. That alone makes us targets."

Her gaze sharpened. "You haven't told anyone else, right?"

"No," he said immediately. "Only those who already know."

A pause.

"Good," she murmured. "Because if that thing knows we know..."

Her fingers curled unconsciously.

"...it won't stay quiet."

The Emperor watched her carefully.

"You're afraid," he said.

She didn't deny it.

"But I'm not helpless," she replied. "Neither are you."

He reached out before thinking and rested his hand lightly over hers.

"I don't fear your strength," he said. "I fear losing you."

Her breath hitched—just slightly.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Outside, the lanterns flickered.

Somewhere far away in the palace, a bell chimed softly.

The Emperor finally straightened.

"I've ordered monks, Taoists, and exorcists into the palace," he said. "Daily purification rituals. Quiet surveillance."

Her lips curved into a small, knowing smile.

"Good," she said. "Let's see who starts feeling uncomfortable."

He returned the smile—sharp, dangerous.

"Yes," he agreed. "Because whoever is hiding... will make a mistake."

And when they do—

Both of them knew.

The palace would no longer be safe for the darkness lurking within.