

Ghost 187

Chapter 187: thread of loyalty

Night in the palace was never truly silent.

Even when lanterns dimmed and courtyards emptied, whispers still lived between carved pillars, behind silk curtains, and beneath the tiled roofs that had witnessed too many secrets. Tonight, those whispers gathered around one place—Lady Chen’s residence.

Lady Chen sat before a bronze mirror, her reflection calm, elegant, flawless. Her fingers moved slowly through her hair, smoothing it with practiced grace. To anyone watching, she looked serene. Only the faint tension in her eyes betrayed the storm beneath.

The palace had changed.

Not in structure, not in rules—but in balance.

The Emperor visited the Empress more frequently now. He spoke her name with ease. He listened to her words. Worse—he trusted her.

Lady Chen exhaled softly.

This will not do.

She rose and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, dismissing her maids. Tonight, she needed privacy. Tonight, she needed certainty.

Lady Chen’s Test

The Emperor arrived shortly after, as expected.

He was dressed simply, without ceremonial robes, his expression weary but attentive. When he entered, Lady Chen stood and greeted him with a gentle smile.

"You've been working late again," she said softly. "Even the candles seem tired."

He gave a faint smile in return. "There's much to settle. The festival preparations, the monk's warnings... unrest never sleeps."

She gestured for him to sit. Tea had already been prepared—his favorite blend, light and calming.

Lady Chen poured it herself.

"I worry for you," she said, lowering her gaze modestly. "You carry too much alone."

He accepted the cup but did not drink immediately. "You've always been thoughtful."

That answer pleased her—just slightly.

She continued carefully, each word chosen like a chess move.

"Lately... you've been spending more time in the Empress's courtyard."

The air shifted.

He looked at her, not sharply, but steadily. "She's my wife."

Lady Chen smiled, unoffended. "Of course. I only mean... after everything that has happened—Princess Zhi's tragedy, Mother's illness, the monk's warnings—I worry that emotions may cloud judgment."

She leaned closer, her voice warm. "I fear someone may use chaos to their advantage."

The Emperor finally drank his tea.

"You're suggesting the Empress?"

Lady Chen did not answer directly. She sighed softly instead. "I would never accuse without proof. I only know that since she returned... misfortune follows."

Silence.

The Emperor set the cup down.

"No," he said calmly.

Lady Chen's fingers tightened slightly on her sleeve.

"No?" she echoed gently.

"She has suffered enough," he continued. "If someone is behind this darkness, they are far more hidden. Blaming her is easy—but wrong."

Lady Chen studied his face.

This was not the hesitant Emperor she expected. This was a man who had already chosen where his trust lay.

So... he passed.

She lowered her head, accepting defeat gracefully. "You're right. Forgive me. Grief makes one suspicious."

He nodded, relieved. "Rest. You've done nothing wrong."

As he rose to leave, Lady Chen watched his back carefully.

Loyal... but no longer blind.

Elsewhere — Empress's Quiet Night

In another corner of the palace, the Empress sat beneath the open window of her chamber, moonlight spilling across the floor.

Her three ghost companions hovered nearby.

Fen Yu sat cross-legged in midair, sulking.

Wei Rong leaned against a pillar, arms crossed.

Li Shen floated near the ceiling, expression unreadable.

"She tested him," Li Shen said calmly.

The Empress nodded. "I know."

Fen Yu scoffed. "That woman smiles like honey but smells like poison."

Wei Rong snorted. "At least the Emperor isn't stupid."

The Empress looked down at her hands. "He's changing."

Li Shen glanced at her. "And so are you."

She didn't deny it.

The palace felt tighter now—like invisible threads pulling from all directions. Lady Chen. The Dowager. Shin Gu. The unseen force in the shadows.

And the Emperor... standing between duty and something far more dangerous.

Attachment.

Far From the Palace — Chen Manor

Beyond the palace walls, Chen Guowei, Lady Chen's father, sat alone in his study.

The letter lay open before him.

No seal. No name.

Yet every word struck like a blade.

> Do not send Chen Ruyi to the palace.

Marry her to the Duke's nephew.

Your past dealings will remain buried—if you choose wisely.

Chen Guowei's hands trembled.

Someone knew.

About the falsified ledgers.

The bribes disguised as donations.

The missing silver that should never have disappeared.

He stood abruptly. "Who dares—"

But no guard had entered. No sound came from outside.

This was not a threat from the palace.

This was worse.

His elder daughter was already inside the dragon's den. His younger daughter... was his last shield.

"Prepare the carriage," he ordered finally. "We are not sending Ruyi anywhere—for now."

Chen Ruyi's Perspective

Chen Ruyi sat by her window, book forgotten in her lap.

Her thoughts were elsewhere.

Lian Rou.

She smiled faintly.

She knew her father was under pressure. She also knew that someone—someone powerful—had intervened.

And she knew exactly who.

Lian Rou would never let her be sent to the palace.

When her father entered with the letter, her heart raced—but she hid it well.

After he left, she pressed her hand to her chest.

Just a little longer.

Back in the Palace — A Shift in the Air

The Emperor stood by the lake once more—the same place where he had once pulled the Empress back from the water.

Moonlight rippled across the surface.

Something was wrong.

He could feel it now—not suspicion, but certainty.

There was an enemy in his palace.

And this time... it wasn't wearing silk openly.

The palace lake reflected the moon like a broken mirror.

The Emperor stood unmoving at its edge, hands clasped behind his back. The wind stirred his robes, but he barely felt the cold. His thoughts were far heavier than the night air.

Someone is moving in the dark.

Not clumsily.

Not recklessly.

But with patience—like a spider spinning a web no one noticed until it tightened.

Princess Zhi's miscarriage.

The oil that appeared from nowhere.

The monk's warning.

The Dowager's fever and visions.

Lady Chen's sudden caution.

Shin Gu's presence that even ghosts avoided.

And then—

The Empress.

Her blank eyes.

Her body walking toward the lake as if pulled by unseen strings.

He clenched his jaw.

That was not fear.

That was control.

The Emperor's Resolve

By the time he returned to his chamber, the Emperor had already decided.

He called for General Wei Jie.

Wei Jie entered swiftly and knelt. "Your Majesty."

"From this moment," the Emperor said quietly, "double the patrols around the inner palace. No noise. No announcements."

Wei Jie's eyes sharpened. "Yes."

"And recruit spiritual practitioners," the Emperor continued. "Monks, Taoists, exorcists. Discreetly. They will live in the palace and perform purification rituals daily."

Wei Jie hesitated only a fraction. "Is the threat confirmed?"

The Emperor looked toward the direction of the Empress's courtyard.

"Not yet," he said. "But it's close."

Lady Chen's Private Thoughts

Lady Chen watched the lanterns sway from her window.

She had failed her test.

The Emperor had chosen caution over comfort.

Truth over implication.

That alone told her everything.

He trusts her now.

Her fingers tightened around the silk handkerchief in her hand.

But trust was not love.

And love could still be claimed.

She reminded herself to be patient.

For now.

Shin Gu's Chamber — Where Ghosts Would Not Linger

Deep in Prince Liang's residence, Shin Gu sat alone before her altar.

Incense smoke curled upward, thick and sweet, forming patterns that did not belong to this world.

She knelt gracefully, her expression serene.

Behind her, unseen, the air rippled.

Three ghosts hovered at the edge of the courtyard.

Fen Yu hugged herself. "I don't like this place."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "This place doesn't like us either."

Li Shen's gaze was sharp. "There's something here. Something that doesn't belong to either side."

Shin Gu's lips curved faintly.

Slowly, deliberately—

She turned her head.

Her eyes did not land on them.

But they felt it.

She sees.

The ghosts recoiled instantly, retreating as if burned.

Fen Yu's voice trembled. "She looked through me."

Wei Rong grimaced. "That wasn't cultivation. That was something else."

Li Shen's tone was grave. "This palace is standing on a fault line."

Empress — Between Worlds

The Empress sat at her desk, candle flickering softly as she stitched.

Her fingers moved automatically, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

She could still feel the sigil's echo inside her chest.

The sword that answered her call.

The weight of power she never asked for.

She closed her eyes briefly.

I only wanted peace.

Fen Yu drifted beside her, unusually quiet.

"Are you afraid?" the ghost asked softly.

The Empress opened her eyes.

"No," she said after a pause. "I'm angry."

Wei Rong snorted. "Good. Fear gets you killed."

Li Shen nodded slightly. "Anger keeps you awake."

She exhaled slowly. "We protect Princess Zhi. Quietly."

Fen Yu clenched her fists. "For the baby."

"For the truth," the Empress corrected.

Elsewhere — Prince Liang's Conflicted Heart

Prince Liang sat alone, staring at the empty cradle that would never be used.

His chest ached.

He had loved Princess Zhi once—deeply.

But somewhere along the way... that love twisted into possession.

And now?

Now he stood between grief and denial.

Shin Gu's presence felt warm. Comforting.

Princess Zhi's silence felt heavy. Accusing.

He drank again.

"I failed," he whispered.

The shadows did not answer.

The Net Tightens

By morning, the palace buzzed with quiet tension.

Servants whispered.

Guards watched more closely.

Ritual incense burned in every corridor.

The Emperor stood at court, face calm, voice steady.

"Let it be known," he announced, "that any disturbances will be dealt with swiftly. The palace is under protection."

Many bowed.

Some trembled.

One smiled behind a sleeve.

Empress and Emperor — Unspoken Alignment

Later that day, the Emperor visited the Empress's courtyard.

They did not speak of ghosts.

They did not speak of suspicion.

Instead, they drank tea.

The Empress finally said, "You don't believe the kitchen story."

"No," he replied.

"Good."

They shared a look.

Trust—not loud, not dramatic—but solid.

Outside, the wind shifted.

Somewhere in the palace, something ancient stirred.

And for the first time—

It realized it had been noticed.