

## **Ghost 188**

Chapter 188: preparing for the coming day

Morning light filtered through the palace corridors, but the calm it brought was deceptive. Beneath the polished floors and silent courtyards, tension coiled like a sleeping beast. The Emperor stood in the inner hall, hands clasped behind his back, facing the monk who had arrived from the Sacred Mount.

The monk's robe was simple, his beard long and silver, his eyes deep as still water. He did not bow too deeply, nor did he appear arrogant. He stood as someone who understood heaven, earth, and the fragile line between them.

"You summoned me, Your Majesty," the monk said softly.

The Emperor nodded. "You said there is something powerful in this palace. Something dark."

"Yes," the monk replied without hesitation. "And it is not alone."

The Emperor's gaze hardened. "I have ordered the recruitment of monks, Taoists, priests, and exorcists. They are already arriving. I want you to train them."

The monk lifted his eyes, finally studying the Emperor carefully. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he sighed.

"So the storm has already reached this place."

The Emperor did not deny it. "I don't know when it will break, but I know this—if we wait until it shows its fangs, it will be too late."

The monk nodded slowly. "You are correct."

He stepped forward, his voice growing heavier. "Dark energies do not announce themselves. They grow quietly, feeding on fear, grief, resentment, and desire. When people finally notice them, the damage is already done."

The Emperor thought of Princess Zhi.

Of the oil on the path.

Of the Empress walking toward the lake with empty eyes.

"Can they be stopped?" he asked.

"Yes," the monk replied. "But not by one person alone."

He turned slightly, as if seeing something beyond the walls of the hall. "The people you have gathered—priests, exorcists, Taoists—many of them know rituals, chants, symbols. But knowledge alone is not enough."

"What do they need?" the Emperor asked.

"Discipline," the monk said. "Unity. And readiness to face things that will shake their minds."

The Emperor straightened. "Then train them."

The monk finally bowed deeply.

"I will," he said. "Because I have seen it."

The Emperor's eyes narrowed. "Seen what?"

The monk met his gaze directly. "In the near future, there will be a confrontation with dark forces tied to human desire and ghost resentment. It will not stay hidden in shadows. It will bleed into the world of the living."

Silence fell.

"The palace," the monk continued, "will become the center of it."

The Emperor did not flinch. "Then this palace will be ready."

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Training Begins

That very afternoon, the inner training grounds were cleared.

Newly recruited monks, Taoists, priests, and exorcists stood in orderly lines. Some were calm. Some nervous. Others curious. None of them fully understood why they had been summoned so urgently.

The monk stood before them, staff in hand.

"You are not here for ceremony," he said plainly. "You are here to survive—and to protect others."

Murmurs spread through the group.

"There will be dark energies you cannot see with normal eyes," he continued. "Entities that feed on grief. On ambition. On love twisted into obsession."

He struck the ground lightly with his staff.

"You will train your bodies," he said. "You will train your minds. And most importantly—you will train your hearts. Fear will get you killed faster than any blade."

The Emperor watched from a distance, his expression unreadable.

The monk began with the basics: grounding rituals, protective seals, meditation to sharpen spiritual awareness. Incense burned thickly in the air as chants echoed through the courtyard. Some trainees faltered, overwhelmed by sensations they had never felt before—pressure in their chests, ringing in their ears, sudden waves of cold.

"This is only the beginning," the monk warned. "If you cannot endure this, you will not endure what is coming."

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#### A Quiet Understanding

From behind a lattice window, the Empress watched silently.

Her three ghost companions hovered near her, unusually serious.

"They're late," Wei Rong muttered. "They should have done this long ago."

Li Shen nodded. "But at least he's listening now."

Fen Yu hugged herself. "Does this mean... it's getting worse?"

The Empress's fingers tightened around the window frame. "It means we're no longer pretending nothing is wrong."

She turned away, her voice low. "And that's dangerous—but necessary."

In the training ground, the monk's chant grew louder, stronger. Symbols flared briefly in the air before fading.

The palace had begun to change.

And somewhere, hidden deep within shadows that did not belong to night, something felt it.

Something old.

Something patient.

And for the first time, it sensed resistance.

Night wrapped the palace in a deceptive calm.

Lanterns flickered softly along the corridors, guards changed shifts, and most of the court believed the danger had passed. The Dowager's fever had broken. Princess Zhi was alive. The Emperor had ordered spiritual reinforcements. To ordinary eyes, balance seemed restored.

But balance was a lie.

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The Monk's Unease

The monk stood alone in the eastern courtyard, prayer beads sliding slowly through his fingers. His eyes were closed, yet his brows were drawn together tightly, as if something unseen pressed against his senses.

The air here felt... wrong.

Not violent.

Not aggressive.

But polished.

Like a blade hidden inside silk.

He turned his head slightly.

That direction.

Shin Gu's residence.

The monk opened his eyes.

A faint chill crawled up his spine—not the crude cold of wandering ghosts, but something deeper. Something cultivated. Controlled.

"This is not resentment," he murmured to himself. "Nor grief."

He exhaled slowly.

"This is intent."

He stepped forward, walking the palace paths without sound. As he neared Shin Gu's courtyard, the incense burning there drifted unnaturally straight, not swaying with the wind.

Too neat.

Too disciplined.

He stopped just outside the boundary stones.

The monk did not cross.

Instead, he raised two fingers and quietly traced a sigil in the air. His pupils darkened, spiritual sight unfolding.

For a brief moment—

Something looked back.

Not directly.

But aware.

The monk's fingers trembled.

He lowered his hand at once, heart pounding beneath his calm expression.

"...So that's where you're hiding," he whispered.

Whatever lived there was not a simple ghost, nor a human dabbling ignorantly in darkness. It was something that understood restraint. Patience. Timing.

A cultivator.

One that knew how to stay invisible.

The monk turned away.

"This palace truly sits on a nest of serpents," he said quietly. "And one of them smiles."

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Nightfall in the Empress's Courtyard

Far from the monk's troubled thoughts, another kind of energy began to stir.

The Empress sat cross-legged on a mat in her chamber, windows shut, curtains drawn. Moonlight slipped through the cracks like silver threads.

It had been a long time since they had done this together.

Too long.

Wei Rong floated near the ceiling, arms crossed.

Li Shen sat properly, scholar-like even in death.

Fen Yu fidgeted, smoothing her sleeves again and again, nervous but excited.

"You're sure it's safe?" Fen Yu asked for the third time.

The Empress nodded. "The monk's wards are focused on the outer palace tonight. We won't be noticed."

Wei Rong snorted. "Good. I was getting rusty."

Li Shen adjusted his posture. "Let us proceed carefully. Our energies have grown—but so has the danger."

The Empress closed her eyes.

"Then we cultivate properly," she said. "Together."

She placed the crystal—dim now but still warm—between them.

The moment her fingers touched it, the air changed.

Not violently.

But deeply.

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Cultivation Begins

Breath slowed.

Heartbeats aligned.

The Empress followed the familiar rhythm—inhale, gather, settle. The energy within her no longer felt wild or foreign. It moved smoothly through her meridians, responding to her will like water guided by riverbanks.

The ghosts felt it too.

Wei Rong's form sharpened, the edges of his armor becoming clearer, more solid.

Li Shen's aura stabilized, no longer flickering like candlelight.

Fen Yu gasped softly as warmth flooded her chest, her translucent form gaining color—faint, but unmistakable.

"I feel... heavy," Fen Yu whispered. "In a good way."

"That's grounding," the Empress said softly. "It means you're no longer drifting."

The crystal pulsed once.

Then again.

Memories surfaced—not painful this time, but instructive.

Wei Rong saw himself standing guard, not as a general, but as a protector.

Li Shen felt knowledge settle, no longer scattered, but organized—ready to be used.

Fen Yu trembled as her longing reshaped itself—not into sorrow, but into resolve.

And the Empress—

She felt rooted.

Not torn between worlds.

Not drifting between roles.

But present.

Alive.

Strong.

Her cultivation no longer felt borrowed.

It was hers.

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A Shared Realization

Suddenly, Fen Yu's eyes snapped open.

"Something's watching."

The Empress's eyes opened instantly.

Wei Rong turned, blade half-formed in instinct.

Li Shen raised a hand. "No—wait."

They listened.

Nothing moved.

But the pressure lingered for a breath longer than comfort allowed.

Then faded.

The Empress exhaled slowly. "The monk."

Li Shen nodded. "Yes. And... something else."

Wei Rong growled. "Not friendly."

Fen Yu hugged herself. "It felt... calm. Too calm."

The Empress's expression hardened.

"Shin Gu," she said quietly.

No one argued.

They all felt it now—that polished, restrained darkness. Not attacking. Not revealing itself.

Waiting.

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Strength for What's Coming

They continued cultivating until the moon climbed high.

When they finally stopped, the room felt different—cleaner, heavier, anchored.

Wei Rong stretched. "I feel like I could punch a mountain."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Please don't."

Fen Yu laughed for the first time that night, light and genuine.

The Empress looked at them—her strange, impossible family.

"We're not ready yet," she said honestly. "But we're no longer helpless."

She stood, resolve settling into her bones.

"And whoever is hiding in this palace—cultivator or monster—"

Her eyes darkened.

"They've already made a mistake."

Wei Rong grinned. "They let us grow."

Outside, the moon slipped behind a cloud.

And in Shin Gu's courtyard, incense burned a little faster than before.

Something there felt... uneasy.

For the first time in a very long while.