

Ghost 191

Chapter 191: palace holding breath

The palace felt wrong.

Even before dawn, when the air should have been crisp and cool, a heavy stuffiness clung to the courtyards like an invisible veil. Lantern flames burned low and unsteady, smoke curling in odd patterns that refused to rise straight.

Maids whispered.

They did not dare raise their voices, but fear had a way of slipping through silence.

"I heard the shadows move on their own last night..." "My cousin swears she saw handprints on the wall that vanished." "They say it's a dark soul... possession..." "No, no, it's worse. It's something summoned."

Rumors spread faster than incense smoke.

Some servants refused to walk alone after sunset. Others tied red threads around their wrists or tucked talismans into their sleeves, praying they would not be the next to witness something unexplainable.

Even the guards felt it.

Veterans who had stood unflinching before blades found themselves gripping their spears tighter, scanning corners that had never frightened them before.

The palace was alive—but not in a good way.

It felt as though something unseen was breathing within its walls.

The Emperor's Watchful Silence

From the high steps of the main hall, the Emperor observed everything with a calm expression that hid a growing unease.

Preparations for the upcoming palace festival were in full motion.

In two weeks, envoys, merchants, artists, and nobles from across the kingdom would flood the palace grounds. Silk banners were being dyed and hung. Wooden stalls were being assembled. Painters practiced designs. Artisans carved and stitched late into the night.

It should have been vibrant.

Instead, it felt strained—like joy forced through clenched teeth.

The Emperor's gaze shifted toward the inner courtyards.

Monks moved quietly between halls, robes brushing the stone floor as they traced purification symbols with ash and water. Taoists murmured chants under their breath. Exorcists burned talismans that crackled strangely, the flames sometimes flaring green before dying.

None of them spoke openly of what they sensed.

But their faces told enough.

Something was there.

Something ancient. Patient. Watching.

And it was not afraid.

The Empress at Work

His eyes softened when they landed on one particular courtyard.

The Empress sat beneath a shaded pavilion, embroidery stretched taut in her hands. Her posture was straight despite the long hours she had already spent there. Fine threads of silk ran between her fingers as she worked, needle moving steadily, carefully.

She had dark circles beneath her eyes.

She was exhausted.

Yet she did not stop.

Day after day, night after night, she practiced—redoing patterns, undoing mistakes, starting again. The old lady assigned to teach her crochet had long since stopped scolding; even she could not deny the Empress's persistence.

The Emperor watched from afar, unseen.

She was trying.

For the festival.

For dignity.

For survival.

The heavy atmosphere pressed down on her too—he could see it in the way she paused sometimes, fingers stiffening briefly before continuing, as if pushing against an invisible weight.

And yet...

She never complained.

Not once.

The Emperor's chest tightened.

She does not know how much she has changed, he thought.

Or perhaps... she does know—and keeps moving anyway.

Whispers Grow Louder

That afternoon, a maid fainted near the western corridor.

She claimed she heard someone calling her name—using her dead mother's voice.

Another servant insisted her reflection blinked at her when she hadn't.

The monks increased their patrols.

Incense burned continuously now, thick enough to sting the eyes.

"It's possession," someone whispered fearfully near the kitchens. "No... it's something worse than a soul." "Then why hasn't it shown itself?" "Because it's waiting."

The words spread like rot.

The Emperor Decides to Wait

As night approached, the Emperor stood alone in his study, festival plans laid out before him.

Two weeks.

Two weeks until the palace would be full of people.

Two weeks until whatever lurked in the shadows might choose to act—or be exposed.

He clenched his fist slowly.

If this darkness surfaces during the festival... the consequences will be catastrophic.

His gaze drifted again toward the Empress's courtyard, now dimly lit by lanterns.

She was still there.

Still embroidering.

Still pushing forward.

The monks continued their chants in the distance, voices low and steady, like a fragile barrier holding back a tide.

The palace did not sleep.

It waited.

And somewhere within its walls, something unseen waited too.

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The Emperor stood by the open window of his study, watching the palace courtyards below. Monks moved quietly, incense still burning, festival banners fluttered without joy, and the air—no matter how many purification rituals were performed—remained heavy.

This will not do, he thought.

Fear fed darkness. Silence let rumors grow teeth.

If the palace continued like this, even without an enemy lifting a finger, people would collapse under their own dread.

He turned sharply.

"Prepare a message," he ordered calmly. "Invite Prince Liang."

The eunuch blinked. "For... an audience, Your Majesty?"

"For a horse race."

The brush froze mid-air.

"A... horse race?"

The Emperor's lips curved faintly. "Yes. Just like before."

Before the palace became cages and titles.

Before grief and suspicion poisoned blood.

Before shadows learned how to hide.

Prince Liang's Shock

When the invitation reached Prince Liang, he read it twice.

Then a third time.

"A horse race?" he repeated, disbelief flickering across his face.

It had been years. Years since the brothers—no, the emperor and the prince—had ridden side by side without strategy, without ceremony, without the weight of the court watching every breath.

For a brief moment, Prince Liang hesitated.

Then something in his chest loosened.

"...Alright," he said quietly. "Tell His Majesty I accept."

News Spreads Like Fire

The palace exploded with excitement.

"A horse race? Between His Majesty and Prince Liang?" "Is it true?" "On the eastern grounds!" "I heard they'll race the old route!"

Laughter replaced whispers. Fear stepped back, if only a little.

Even servants straightened their backs. Guards smiled openly. Maids peeked from behind columns, eyes shining with anticipation.

The monks paused their chanting, exchanging glances.

A living palace is harder to haunt.

The Empress Hears the News

The Empress was in her chamber when the news reached her.

"A horse race?" she repeated, eyes widening.

She had read of such events in old records—imperial displays of strength, freedom, rivalry—but she had never seen one. Not in this era. Not with her own eyes.

Her heart beat faster.

"They really race?" she asked, almost incredulous. "No ministers? No speeches?"

The maid smiled. "They say it's just the two of them. Like the old days."

The Empress felt something stir—curiosity, excitement, a rare lightness.

"I want to see," she said immediately.

At the corner of the room, three ghosts slept in various undignified positions—Fen Yu floating upside down, Li Shen leaning against a beam as if dozing mid-lecture, Wei Rong seated like a statue with eyes closed.

She glanced at them.

"...Of course you're all asleep now."

They did not stir.

For once, she did not wake them.

She changed quickly, choosing simple clothes, her steps light as she left the chamber.

The Grounds Awaken

By the time she reached the racing grounds, the place was alive.

People gathered along the edges—officials pretending not to care, servants openly cheering, guards exchanging bets they absolutely should not be making.

The track itself was wide and long, stretching across open land beyond the palace walls, marked by fluttering banners.

Two horses stood at the start.

One black as midnight, muscles coiled with barely contained power.

One chestnut, elegant and fierce, eyes bright with challenge.

The Empress recognized them instantly.

The Emperor's horse—disciplined, relentless.

Prince Liang's—swift, daring.

A murmur rippled through the crowd as the two riders appeared.

The Emperor wore no ceremonial robes, only fitted riding attire, hair tied back simply. He looked younger like this. Freer.

Prince Liang mounted his horse with a familiar ease, a grin tugging at his lips as if something old and wild had been awakened.

For a moment, they looked not like ruler and subordinate—

But brothers who had once raced the wind for fun.

At the Starting Line

Prince Liang glanced sideways. "You're serious about this?"

The Emperor's eyes glinted. "Afraid?"

A sharp laugh escaped Prince Liang. "You wish."

The tension between them shifted—not gone, but lighter. Less sharp.

A guard raised a flag.

Silence fell.

The Empress held her breath without realizing it.

Then—

The flag dropped.

Thunder on the Earth

They were gone.

Hooves struck the ground like thunder, dirt flying, wind tearing past. The crowd erupted—cheers, gasps, shouts.

The Emperor took the lead first, posture perfect, control absolute.

Prince Liang pushed hard, leaning low, laughter carried away by the wind.

The track curved. Dust rose.

The Empress felt her pulse race with them.

They were fast—faster than she imagined. Not restrained by court etiquette, not slowed by hesitation.

Alive.

At the final stretch, Prince Liang surged forward, neck and neck with the Emperor.

For a heartbeat, they were equal.

Then the Emperor leaned forward just slightly—

And crossed the line first.

The ground exploded with cheers.

Prince Liang slowed, breathless, hair wild, eyes bright.

"Tch," he muttered, then laughed openly. "Still unbeatable."

The Emperor dismounted smoothly, extending a hand without thinking.

Prince Liang stared at it for half a second—

Then took it.

A Palace Breathes Again

Laughter rang across the grounds.

People talked excitedly, faces flushed, fear forgotten for now.

The Empress stood among them, smiling without restraint.

For the first time in days, the palace did not feel like it was holding its breath.

Somewhere deep within the walls, something unseen shifted—

Disturbed.