

Ghost 196

Chapter 196: lattern silk

Night descended upon the palace wrapped in silk and firelight.

By the time the moon rose high, the entire imperial ground had transformed. Lanterns—hundreds of them—hung from carved wooden frames, glowing softly in shades of gold and crimson. Long tents stretched across the courtyards, each displaying the works prepared by palace women: embroidery framed in delicate hoops, crochet patterns laid carefully on velvet cloth, paintings propped upright, pottery gleaming under torchlight.

Music drifted through the air—flutes and zithers weaving together in a gentle harmony.

It should have been perfect.

And yet—

A strange tension pulsed beneath the celebration, subtle but undeniable.

The Empress's Quiet Nerves

Empress Lian An stood before her display, hands folded calmly in front of her, expression composed.

Only those who knew her well would notice the tightness in her fingers.

Her embroidery lay displayed on a low wooden table—soft ivory cloth stitched with a pattern of plum blossoms under moonlight. The stitches were not flawless. A trained eye would notice uneven spacing in places, threads pulled too tight in others.

But the piece had something else.

Emotion.

The blossoms were alive. Gentle. Resilient.

It did not look like the work of a pampered palace woman.

It looked like the work of someone who had lived.

Fen Yu floated behind her shoulder, peeking at the embroidery.

"...It's not ugly," she admitted reluctantly.

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "For someone who learned in days, it's respectable."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "More than respectable. It carries intent."

Lian An exhaled slowly. "If the Dowager hates it, I'll survive."

Fen Yu snorted. "You survived worse."

Ghosts, Lanterns, and Unintended Help

As guests began circulating, the ghosts grew restless.

Fen Yu zipped through lanterns, adjusting them unconsciously. One flickered brighter. Another dimmed slightly. The effect—unintentional—made the entire embroidery area glow warmly, drawing attention.

"Why are people staring?" Fen Yu whispered.

Wei Rong frowned. "You brightened the lanterns."

"I did?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Nearby, a noblewoman stopped before Lian An's display.

"This embroidery... it feels soothing."

Another added, "It's simple, but I can't stop looking at it."

More gathered.

Li Shen's eyes widened slightly. "Fen Yu."

Fen Yu beamed. "I helped."

"You interfered."

"I enhanced."

Lian An hissed under her breath, "Stop glowing things."

Fen Yu zipped away guiltily—straight through another lantern. It swayed, casting moving shadows that made the plum blossoms appear as if swaying in moonlight.

Gasps rose from the crowd.

"...It's moving."

"How exquisite."

Lian An closed her eyes.

The Dowager's Unease

From the elevated pavilion, the Dowager watched the festival with narrowed eyes.

At first, she had been satisfied.

The crowd was lively. The women were obedient. The festival followed tradition.

Then she noticed it.

Her gaze fixed on one corner of the courtyard.

The Empress.

Too many people were gathering there.

Too quietly.

No loud praise. No exaggerated flattery.

Just... attention.

The Dowager's fingers tightened on her cup.

"Why are the lanterns brighter there?" she asked coolly.

Lady Chen followed her gaze. Her smile faltered for half a breath.

"It does seem... focused."

The Dowager's eyes sharpened.

"And the air," she murmured. "Do you feel it?"

Lady Chen hesitated. "...It is warmer."

Not just warmer.

Alive.

The Dowager's instincts—honed by decades in the palace—screamed warning.

Something was off.

The Emperor Notices Too

Across the courtyard, the Emperor stood with Prince Liang, pretending to enjoy wine.

But his eyes kept drifting.

To Lian An.

She stood quietly, answering polite questions, bowing lightly. She did not seek attention.

Yet it found her.

The lantern light softened her features. Her embroidery—humble, imperfect—held people captive far longer than the intricate gold-threaded works nearby.

Prince Liang followed the Emperor's gaze and laughed.

"You always notice strange things."

The Emperor did not reply.

He felt it too.

That faint pressure in the air.

Not dark.

But powerful.

Dowager Approaches

The crowd parted when the Dowager rose.

Silence spread like ripples across water.

Lian An straightened as the Dowager approached her display.

Fen Yu hovered nervously. "She's coming."

Wei Rong tensed. "Do nothing."

Fen Yu clasped her hands behind her back. "I swear."

The Dowager stopped before the embroidery.

She studied it for a long moment.

Too long.

"This is yours?" she asked coldly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lian An replied evenly.

The Dowager's gaze flicked to the stitches. The lantern glow. The way the shadows moved unnaturally—just slightly.

"...Interesting," the Dowager said.

Lady Chen stepped forward smoothly. "The Empress has always been... practical. It suits her."

The Dowager hummed.

"Practical things rarely draw this much attention."

Her gaze lifted—briefly, sharply—to Lian An's eyes.

For a split second—

Fen Yu felt it.

That pressure.

Like being seen.

She shrieked silently and ducked behind Wei Rong.

The Dowager looked away.

"...See that it is sold for charity," she said finally. "No more."

Relief rushed through Lian An's chest.

Ghosts Cause One Last Incident

Just as the Dowager turned to leave—

A gust of wind swept through the courtyard.

Lanterns swayed violently.

Someone screamed.

A row of silk banners tangled themselves together midair.

Fen Yu yelped. "That wasn't me!"

Wei Rong snarled. "Something pushed back."

Li Shen's expression darkened. "There is interference."

The Emperor stepped forward instantly, voice firm.

"Remain calm."

The guards moved, restoring order.

To outsiders, it looked like nothing more than wind.

But Lian An knew better.

Something unseen had brushed against the ghosts.

Testing.

Watching.

Aftermath

As the festival continued, tension lingered like a thin veil.

The Empress's embroidery sold quietly—for a high donation.

The Dowager kept glancing toward the shadows.

The Emperor stayed close to Lian An without realizing it.

And the ghosts—

For once—

Were silent.

Fen Yu whispered, "Next time... we don't help."

Wei Rong nodded grimly. "Next time, we fight."

Li Shen closed his eyes. "The palace has awakened something."

Lian An looked up at the lantern-lit sky, heart steady but alert.

The festival had revealed more than art.

It had revealed movement.

And whatever lurked beneath the palace had finally noticed her.

The palace did not sleep that night.

Even after the lanterns were extinguished and the last guests departed, a strange heaviness lingered in the air—subtle enough that ordinary people dismissed it as fatigue from celebration, yet dense enough that those sensitive to the unseen felt their skin prickle.

The Dowager felt it the moment she returned to her chambers.

She sat before the bronze mirror, allowing her maids to remove her ornaments, her expression calm but her fingers clenched tightly in her lap.

That embroidery...

It should not have drawn attention.

It should not have felt alive.

And yet, for a fleeting moment, standing before it, she had felt something brush against her senses—something ancient, restrained, watching from behind layers of silk and stone.

"Leave," she said suddenly.

The maids froze, then bowed and withdrew without question.

The room fell silent.

Only then did the Dowager rise and walk toward the far wall, where an unassuming incense cabinet stood. She opened it, revealing not incense—but a hidden compartment.

From within, she took out a thin jade tablet etched with faint, fading runes.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Summon him."

She pressed her thumb to the tablet. A sharp sting followed, and a drop of blood soaked into the jade.

The runes glowed—once.

Then faded.

The Dowager closed her eyes.

Whatever was stirring in the palace... she would not face it blind.

The Summoned One

Far from the capital, deep within a mountain monastery where bells rang only at dawn and dusk, a man slowly opened his eyes.

He sat in meditation atop a stone platform, robes ash-gray, hair bound loosely behind him. His features were unremarkable—until he looked directly at you. Then one felt as if every hidden thought had been laid bare.

A jade tablet before him pulsed faintly.

He sighed.

"So... it has begun."

A young disciple knelt nearby. "Master?"

"The palace has disturbed something it should not have," the man said calmly as he rose. "Prepare the seals. I am being summoned."

"Is it... dangerous?"

The master's lips curved faintly.

"It always is."

Beneath the Palace — Where Light Should Not Reach

While the Dowager made preparations aboveground, three very unhappy ghosts drifted through the palace foundations.

"This place smells wrong," Fen Yu muttered, hugging herself.

They had followed a strange pull—an unnatural pressure beneath the palace stones that even Li Shen could not ignore. It was not dark energy exactly... but compressed.

As if something enormous had been folded, sealed, and buried.

Wei Rong floated lower, his expression grim. "This isn't new."

Li Shen nodded. "No. This array is old. Very old."

They reached a forgotten passage beneath the eastern courtyard, its entrance hidden behind stone and moss. No guards passed here. No servants cleaned here.

It was deliberately avoided.

At its center lay the array.

Carved directly into the bedrock.

Layer upon layer of sigils interlocking like a puzzle—each line faint, worn by time, yet still intact. The air above it trembled faintly, like heat haze.

Fen Yu swallowed. "What... is that?"

"A suppression array," Li Shen answered quietly. "One meant to seal something that cannot be destroyed."

Wei Rong's fists clenched. "Then why does it feel like it's weakening?"

As if in answer—

A faint crack spread across one of the outer sigils.

The ground shuddered.

Fen Yu screamed and grabbed Wei Rong's sleeve. "IT MOVED."

Li Shen stared, stunned. "No. It responded."

The array was reacting.

To what?

Aboveground, in the Dowager's chamber, incense smoke curled unnaturally.

And far away, a spiritual master stepped onto a carriage bound for the capital.

Something buried beneath the palace was waking.

And everyone—living or dead—was already standing on its threshold.