

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 29: emperor unease

The great hall was silent except for the rustle of maps under the Emperor's hand.

Morning light slanted across the marble floor, cold and gold, catching the faint steam from the brazier.

Duke Lian stood at attention, head bowed.

Across the table, Emperor Zhao Rui flipped through the ledger — the same mysterious book that had appeared in the Duke's study.

Every page glowed faintly with ink and treachery.

When he finally closed it, the sound was sharp, deliberate.

"This is no rumor," Zhao Rui said. His voice was calm, but the words carried a chill. "This ledger exposes theft—treason—from the Bureau of Trade. Grain meant for soldiers replaced by empty numbers."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And no one knows who brought it?"

The Duke hesitated. "None, Your Majesty. The guards saw no one. The doors were locked. The only clue—sandalwood scent."

The Emperor's fingers paused mid-tap on the table. He said nothing for a long time.

Finally, he turned, voice low. "Then Heaven sent it... or someone who serves quietly beneath its shadow."

Zhao Rui paced to the map. "You will go to the northern border yourself. Take Captain Rong and ten men you trust. No banners, no insignia. This must be silent."

The Duke bowed. "And if this leads to the Chen family?"

"Then the Chen family will answer to me," Zhao Rui said flatly. "No matter who they share blood with."

The Duke inclined his head, relief and dread mixing in his face. "I understand."

But when the Emperor fell quiet again, something in his expression shifted. His tone lowered — no longer imperial command, but thought turned inward.

Zhao Rui stood still, his hand resting against the edge of the map table.

For a moment, his gaze drifted — not northward to the frontier, but inward, toward a face that haunted his thoughts more than he cared to admit.

The Empress.

Once, she had been soft as silk — docile, delicate, too eager to please.

He remembered the way she used to bow too low, her words honeyed, her laughter gentle but hollow.

She had cried when ignored and smiled when pitied.

That woman had vanished.

Now, when she spoke, her voice was steady, blunt, almost careless of rank or grace.

She met his gaze like an equal — not insolent, but unafraid.

And when she did, it stirred something sharp and restless beneath his skin.

Everyone called her calmer now, docile again after her purification.

But Zhao Rui knew better.

"She isn't soft anymore," he murmured without realizing. "She speaks like a man — no manner, no fear."

The Duke looked up, startled. "Your Majesty?"

Zhao Rui's eyes refocused. "Nothing."

He exhaled slowly, but the thought stayed — she irritates him.

Not because she disrespected him, but because she spoke the truth so plainly that he could no longer hide behind power.

"She can get under a man's skin," he said at last, half to himself.

The Duke frowned. "Your Majesty?"

Zhao Rui gave a small, humorless smile. "Your daughter. When she speaks, she doesn't shout or flatter — she simply looks at you until you question your own words."

The Duke lowered his gaze respectfully, unsure how to respond.

Zhao Rui turned away, continuing, "Everyone says she's obedient now, but obedience isn't what I see. It's clarity. She looks at the world as though she's seen it die once already."

He tapped the map with two fingers. "People change after surviving death. Perhaps she has."

When the conversation ended, Zhao Rui dismissed the Duke to prepare for departure.

But as the man's footsteps faded, the Emperor remained in the hall, silent.

His hand rested over the closed ledger.

A faint trace of sandalwood still lingered on it — the same scent the Duke had mentioned.

His jaw tightened.

"She changes. The world shifts. And now truth walks through locked doors."

He turned toward the doorway. "Prepare the horses. I'll ride with Duke Lian. The court will think it's an inspection."

The attendant hesitated. "And the Empress, Your Majesty?"

Zhao Rui's expression was unreadable. "She's in her father's house. I'll bring her back myself once this is over."

The attendant bowed and left.

For a long time, the Emperor stood alone, his face half-shadowed by light.

He whispered to no one, "If she dares to speak to me without fear... then I'll see if she dares to look at me again when I return."

The brazier hissed softly — the only answer to his thoughts.