

## **Ghost 190**

Chapter 190: the palace night

Night in the palace was never truly silent.

Even when lanterns dimmed and footsteps faded, the palace breathed—through stone, through shadow, through memories sealed beneath layers of history. Tonight, that breath was uneven.

The Empress and the Array

Long after the last patrol passed, Lian An rose from her bed.

She moved quietly, barefoot against the cold floor, her outer robe already prepared. The three ghosts hovered nearby, unusually silent.

"You're doing it again," Fen Yu whispered.

"I have to," Lian An replied softly. "Before someone else forces the palace to move first."

She slipped out through the hidden passage the monk had shown her. The way opened only for her now—stone yielding with a low hum, as if recognizing her presence.

Deep below, the ancient chamber waited.

The array did not flare when she stepped onto it this time.

It pulsed.

Slow. Steady.

Like a heart.

Lian An closed her eyes and sank to her knees, palms resting lightly against the engraved lines.

She remembered the monk's words.

Do not command. Listen.

Her breath slowed.

Her cultivation unfolded—not aggressively, not sharply, but like water spreading into cracks.

Immediately, information flooded her mind.

She saw sealed nodes beneath the palace:

—Dormant wards under the Dowager's courtyard

—A weakened barrier near Prince Liang's residence

—An irregular fluctuation... thin, coiled, hiding itself like a snake in tall grass

Her brows furrowed.

"This one," she murmured. "It doesn't belong to the palace."

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "External."

Li Shen nodded grimly. "And clever."

The array reacted faintly, a subtle tightening—acknowledging the anomaly but not exposing it.

"Someone is feeding it emotions," Lian An realized. "Jealousy. Grief. Fear. Not enough to break it... just enough to blind it."

Fen Yu shivered. "That's disgusting."

Lian An opened her eyes.

"I can't activate the array," she said quietly. "But I can redirect it."

She placed her hand over the central sigil again.

This time, she didn't push energy inward.

She pulled awareness outward.

The palace responded.

Far above, shadows stirred.

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Shin Gu's Jealousy

In Prince Liang's residence, Shin Gu stood frozen in the corridor.

Ahead of her, beneath the soft glow of lantern light, Prince Liang was helping Princess Zhi adjust a shawl around her shoulders. His movements were careful—gentle in a way he hadn't been with Shin Gu for days.

"Walk slowly," he said. "Your body hasn't fully recovered."

Princess Zhi smiled faintly. "I know."

That smile pierced Shin Gu like a blade.

Her fingers curled inside her sleeves.

That should be me.

She watched him lower his head slightly to listen, watched his hand hover near Princess Zhi's back without touching—as if afraid she might break.

Her chest burned.

She lost the child and gained pity, Shin Gu thought bitterly. I give him comfort, warmth, devotion—and still I stand in her shadow.

For a moment, something dark stirred within her.

The incense she carried trembled.

Then—

A pressure.

Not external.

Internal.

The palace tightened around her like a warning breath.

Shin Gu stiffened, instinctively suppressing her emotions.

She lowered her head, retreating into shadow.

But jealousy lingered.

And jealousy, once seeded, always seeks soil.

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Lady Chen Notices the Shift

Elsewhere, Lady Chen paused mid-step in her own courtyard.

She frowned, placing a hand against her chest.

"...Strange."

The air felt different tonight. Heavier. Sharper.

She turned slowly, scanning the lantern-lit paths.

For years, she had lived inside this palace. She knew its rhythms. Its moods.

Tonight, something was off.

Not hostile.

Alert.

She pressed her lips together.

When the Emperor arrived later that evening, she studied him carefully.

"You seem... distracted," she said gently, pouring tea.

He accepted the cup but didn't drink immediately.

"Do I?" he asked.

She smiled faintly. "You've been like this since the Empress fell ill."

A pause.

"She didn't fall ill," he said quietly.

Lady Chen's fingers tightened around the teapot.

"Oh?"

He looked up then—really looked at her.

"There are things happening in this palace," he continued evenly, "that don't respond to tradition or rank."

She searched his expression.

"...Are you saying you trust her judgment?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

That answer landed heavier than any accusation.

Lady Chen lowered her gaze, hiding the flicker in her eyes.

So it has begun, she thought.

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Strategic Reliance

Later that night, the Emperor stood in the Empress's courtyard.

She was already waiting.

"You felt it," she said before he spoke.

"Yes," he replied. "The palace tightened."

They walked side by side beneath the trees, careful to keep their voices low.

"There's a foreign presence," she said. "Not fully inside the palace systems."

"And Shin Gu?" he asked directly.

Lian An paused.

"I can't confirm," she said honestly. "But her emotions spiked tonight. Strong enough to ripple."

His jaw tightened.

"I need you," he said.

Not as a husband.

As an emperor.

"As what?" she asked calmly.

"As my eyes," he answered. "The palace listens to you. It doesn't listen to me."

She studied him for a long moment.

"Then you need to protect me politically," she said. "No more isolation."

"I will," he said without hesitation.

"And Princess Zhi," she added softly. "She's a target."

His expression darkened.

"I know."

For the first time, their alliance felt real.

Not forced.

Not convenient.

Necessary.

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Back to the Array

When the Emperor left, Lian An returned underground once more.

This time, the array responded faster.

She focused—not on Shin Gu directly, but on patterns.

Jealousy. Loss. Desire.

The array shifted subtly, mapping emotional pressure points across the palace.

She felt it then.

A pull.

Like something recoiling.

"Did you feel that?" Fen Yu whispered.

"Yes," Lian An replied.

"Someone noticed."

She withdrew immediately, cutting the connection cleanly.

As the chamber dimmed, she exhaled slowly.

"They're going to move," she said.

Wei Rong smiled grimly.

"Good."

Above them, somewhere deep within the palace walls, something ancient stirred—no longer dormant, no longer blind.

The palace remembered its purpose.

And the Empress had begun to learn its language.

The lake behind the palace lay quiet, its surface smooth as polished jade under the dim lantern light. A thin mist hovered close to the water, curling lazily around the stone railings as if reluctant to leave.

Shin Gu sat alone on the edge of the pavilion, her knees drawn close, fingers clutching the silk of her sleeves so tightly that the fabric creased. Her gaze was fixed on the water, but she wasn't really seeing it.

She was seeing him.

Prince Liang's back as he walked beside Princess Zhi.

The way his hand hovered near her shoulder.

The care in his eyes—an attention Shin Gu had once believed belonged only to her.

Her chest tightened.

She had loved him quietly at first, carefully, like a flame protected from the wind. Later, when he allowed her closer, when he sought her company more often, she believed—truly believed—that love had finally chosen her.

Yet tonight, watching him with Princess Zhi, that belief cracked.

"Why does it still hurt?" she whispered to herself.

Footsteps approached behind her, soft and measured.

Lady Chen stopped a few steps away, observing the scene before announcing her presence. The way Shin Gu sat—too still, too rigid—told her everything she needed to know.

"You shouldn't sit so close to the water at night," Lady Chen said gently. "The air is cold."

Shin Gu startled and quickly wiped her eyes, forcing a smile that didn't reach them.

"My Lady... I didn't hear you come."

Lady Chen walked closer and sat beside her, leaving a respectful distance. She followed Shin Gu's gaze to the lake, then back to her pale face.

"You look troubled," she said softly. "What's weighing on your heart?"

For a moment, Shin Gu hesitated. Then the restraint she'd held onto all evening finally snapped.

"I'm jealous," she admitted, her voice trembling despite herself.

Lady Chen didn't interrupt.

"I saw Prince Liang with Princess Zhi today," Shin Gu continued, staring at her clenched hands. "I know she lost the child. I know she deserves care. But... even knowing that, it hurts."

She laughed bitterly.

"I've done so much for him. I stay quiet. I never complain. I support him, comfort him, give him everything he asks for. Yet when he looks at her... it's like I don't exist."

Lady Chen's eyes darkened slightly, though her expression remained calm.

"And you feel cast aside," she said.

Shin Gu nodded.

"He chooses her. Again and again. No matter how gentle I am, how obedient... I'm always second."

She finally looked up, her eyes red.

"Am I wrong to feel this way?"

Lady Chen studied her carefully.

"No," she said after a pause. "You're human. Wanting to be chosen isn't a sin."

Shin Gu's shoulders relaxed a fraction, as if those words alone granted her permission to breathe.

"But..." Lady Chen continued evenly, "you must understand something."

Shin Gu turned fully toward her.

"In households like ours," Lady Chen said, "love is rarely enough. Position, timing, and perception matter just as much."

Shin Gu swallowed.

"Then what should I do?"

Lady Chen didn't answer immediately. She looked out over the lake, watching the lantern reflections tremble on the water.

"Princess Zhi has sympathy now," she said slowly. "Loss makes people protective. Prince Liang's attention is natural—for the moment."

Shin Gu clenched her jaw.

"And after?"

"That," Lady Chen said, turning back to her, "depends on who remains steady when sympathy fades."

Shin Gu's eyes flickered.

"I don't want to hurt her," she said quickly. "I truly don't."

Lady Chen nodded.

"Of course. Wanting affection doesn't mean wishing harm."

She reached out and lightly placed a hand over Shin Gu's sleeve—reassuring, measured.

"But remember this," she added quietly. "A woman who waits endlessly will always lose to one who understands timing."

Shin Gu's breath caught.

Lady Chen withdrew her hand and stood.

"Rest tonight. Don't let jealousy consume you—it clouds judgment."

She paused, then added, almost casually,

"Prince Liang notices calm more than desperation."

Shin Gu nodded slowly.

As Lady Chen walked away, her expression softened again, but her eyes remained sharp.

Behind her, Shin Gu stared at the lake once more.

The water rippled faintly.

And deep within her chest, something restless stirred—not violent, not malicious—but hungry.

Hungry to be chosen.