

Ghost 195

Chapter 195: under the star

The palace finally quieted after dinner.

Lanterns dimmed one by one, servants retreated into shadows, and the echoes of laughter from the dining hall slowly dissolved into the night air. Even the wind seemed gentler, as if it, too, was reluctant to disturb the fragile calm that had settled over the palace.

But sleep refused to come.

Empress Lian An lay on her bed, eyes open, staring at the embroidered canopy above her. The patterns—clouds, phoenix feathers, twisting vines—blurred together no matter how many times she blinked.

Her mind wouldn't slow down.

The dinner. Prince Liang's sudden change. Shin Gu's arrival. Princess Zhi's quiet, practiced indifference. The Dowager's satisfied smile.

Too many thoughts tangled together, tighter than any embroidery thread she had ever fought with.

With a soft sigh, Lian An pushed herself up.

She slipped on a light outer robe, careful not to alert the maid resting in the adjoining room. Quietly, she opened the door and stepped out into the night.

The garden greeted her like an old friend.

Moonlight spilled across stone paths and flower beds. Night-blooming flowers released a faint fragrance, sweet and cool. Fireflies drifted lazily between bushes, glowing like scattered stars that had lost their way.

Lian An walked barefoot onto the grass and tilted her head up.

The sky was clear tonight.

Stars stretched endlessly above her, bright and indifferent, as if the troubles of the palace were nothing more than dust beneath their gaze.

"Still can't sleep?" a familiar voice drawled.

She didn't even turn around.

"I thought you three would already be arguing about something."

A ripple passed through the air, and three figures slowly manifested beside her.

Wei Rong appeared first, arms crossed, posture straight even in death.

Li Shen followed, floating slightly above the ground, folding his sleeves with scholarly precision.

Fen Yu appeared last—dramatically—dropping down as if she'd fallen from the sky, hair disheveled on purpose.

"We were being peaceful," Fen Yu huffed. "You're the one who summoned us with your restlessness."

"I didn't summon anyone," Lian An replied dryly. "You all just hover like unpaid bodyguards."

Wei Rong snorted. "Unpaid? We died for you."

"You died because you were stubborn," Li Shen corrected calmly.

Fen Yu pointed at him. "You literally challenged a ghost general to a duel because he insulted your calligraphy."

"That was a matter of principle."

Lian An laughed despite herself.

It was a quiet laugh, one that felt unfamiliar but welcome.

She lowered herself onto a stone bench beneath a flowering tree. The petals above rustled gently, a few drifting down to land in her hair.

Fen Yu immediately noticed.

"Oh-ho," she said, floating closer. "Even the flowers want to cling to you now."

"Don't start," Lian An warned.

Wei Rong smirked. "She's right. You've changed."

Lian An raised an eyebrow. "Changed how?"

Li Shen studied her thoughtfully. "Your aura is steadier. Stronger. Less... lonely."

She didn't answer right away.

Instead, she leaned back, resting her hands on the cool stone, gazing at the stars again.

"It's been a long time," she said quietly, "since I just sat like this."

"With us?" Fen Yu asked.

"With myself."

The ghosts fell silent.

For a moment, the only sound was the night breeze and the distant chirping of insects.

"In my previous life," Lian An continued, "I was always busy. Cooking, managing, surviving. No parents. No one waiting for me. Even when the restaurant was full, it felt empty."

She glanced sideways at them.

"After transmigrating... I thought this world would be worse. Palace politics. Power games. Cold relationships."

Fen Yu crossed her arms. "And?"

"And somehow," Lian An said softly, "I ended up with three ghosts who won't leave me alone."

Wei Rong scoffed. "Ungrateful."

"But I don't feel alone anymore," she finished.

Fen Yu froze.

Li Shen's expression softened.

Wei Rong looked away, pretending to examine the flowers.

Fen Yu sniffed loudly. "You better not be saying emotional things just because it's night."

Lian An smiled. "Too late."

Fen Yu floated dramatically onto the bench, flopping beside her. "Fine. Since we're being sentimental—when you hugged me earlier, I almost cried."

"Almost?" Wei Rong teased.

"I DID cry," Fen Yu snapped. "Just internally."

Li Shen chuckled quietly.

For a while, they simply sat together—an empress and three ghosts under the stars—mocking each other, reminiscing, and enjoying a rare moment of peace.

Then, inevitably, reality returned.

Fen Yu squinted at Lian An. "You've been frowning for the last five minutes. What are you thinking about now?"

"The festival," Lian An groaned.

All three ghosts reacted instantly.

"Oh no." "Not that." "Please don't say embroidery."

She buried her face in her hands. "I still have to finish that piece. Three days left. And it looks like a chicken got into a fight with a spider."

Fen Yu burst out laughing so hard she nearly rolled off the bench. "I TOLD YOU. Even the ghosts in the underworld would refuse to buy that."

Wei Rong smirked. "If the Dowager sees it again, she might ban embroidery entirely."

Li Shen tried—unsuccessfully—to maintain dignity. "Your tension is uneven. The symmetry is—how shall I put it—rebellious."

"You're supposed to encourage me," Lian An protested.

"We are encouraging you," Fen Yu said cheerfully. "Encouraging you to accept reality."

Lian An groaned. "Why did I agree to crochet?"

"Because you wanted peace," Wei Rong replied. "And peace always comes at a price."

Fen Yu leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. "On the bright side, if it doesn't sell, you can always say it's abstract art."

"That excuse only works once," Lian An muttered.

Li Shen tapped his chin thoughtfully. "You know... if you approach it like cooking—step by step, no emotion—you might improve faster."

She looked at him.

"That's actually... good advice."

Fen Yu blinked. "Wait. Did Scholar Ghost just give useful advice?"

"Miracles happen," Li Shen replied serenely.

They laughed again, softer this time.

Above them, the stars continued to shine, indifferent yet constant.

Lian An exhaled, feeling something loosen in her chest.

No matter what awaited her—festivals, politics, hidden enemies, or crooked embroidery—she wasn't facing it alone.

She stood up, brushing petals from her sleeves.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go back. Tomorrow, I fight with thread again."

Fen Yu cracked her knuckles. "We'll be there to laugh."

Wei Rong nodded. "And guard."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "And advise."

Lian An paused, looking at them.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Fen Yu scoffed. "Say that again and I'll haunt you."

But she smiled all the same.

Together, they walked back toward the softly lit palace—four shadows blending into one—while the stars watched in silence.

And somewhere between laughter and looming duty, Lian An felt ready to face the days ahead.

Morning arrived in the palace like a breath of fresh air.

Sunlight spilled through the tall palace gates and painted the stone courtyards in gold. The heaviness that had lingered for days—dark, suffocating, and unsettling—had vanished overnight. Even the air felt lighter, as if the palace itself had exhaled.

Servants noticed it first.

"This morning feels... different," a young maid whispered while carrying a basket of silk ribbons.

"Yes," another replied, smiling unconsciously. "I slept better than I have in days."

Laughter drifted through the corridors.

The palace was alive.

With the festival only three days away, every courtyard buzzed with activity. Colored cloths were hung from wooden frames. Lanterns were cleaned and polished. Flower arrangements filled the walkways, their fragrance mixing with the scent of freshly scrubbed stone.

From one corner, the rhythmic tapping of hammers echoed as guards erected stalls. From another, women sat in groups, heads bent low, fingers busy with embroidery, crochet, painting, and beadwork.

For the first time in a long while, the palace felt... joyful.

The Women's Courtyard

In the women's courtyard, the atmosphere was especially lively.

Concubines and noble ladies sat together—some genuinely focused, others pretending to work while secretly observing their rivals.

"Look at Lady Zhang's embroidery," one whispered. "Her stitches are so neat."

"Of course," another replied lightly. "She practiced since childhood."

Nearby, Princess Zhi sat calmly, working on a handkerchief. Her movements were slow but steady, her expression peaceful. The cats curled near her feet, occasionally batting at loose threads.

Not far away, Lady Chen supervised her attendants, offering soft corrections with a gentle smile.

And in the center of it all—

Chaos.

Ghosts at Work

Only one person could see the real reason the palace felt too lively.

Empress Lian An stood under a flowering tree, hands folded behind her back, watching the scene with narrowed eyes.

"Fen Yu," she said calmly, "why is that guard slipping again?"

Fen Yu floated nearby, biting her lip to keep from laughing. "I didn't mean to trip him twice. He just... walks so confidently."

A loud thump echoed.

The same guard hit the ground again, groaning.

Wei Rong raised an eyebrow. "You lack restraint."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves. "And technique."

Fen Yu glared at both of them. "Oh please. As if you two are innocent."

At that exact moment, two maids passing by suddenly shrieked.

"AH—!"

Their hair ribbons tangled together as if pulled by invisible hands.

Wei Rong cleared his throat. "That... might have been me."

Lian An turned slowly.

Wei Rong straightened. "For discipline."

"You pulled their hair," Lian An said flatly.

"They were gossiping."

"That does not justify—"

Before she could finish, Li Shen floated past and flicked a finger. A broom leaning against a wall tipped over, sending a cascade of silk rolls tumbling.

Servants scrambled.

"Careful!" "Those are festival cloths!" "Who put the broom there?!"

Fen Yu burst out laughing.

"This palace is so boring without us," she said proudly.

Lian An pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I swear," she muttered, "if the Dowager sees this, I will personally exile all three of you to the coldest corner of the underworld."

Wei Rong smirked. "She won't see it."

Li Shen nodded. "We're subtle."

At that exact moment, a guard ran past shouting, "WHY IS MY HELMET ON THE ROOF?!"

Fen Yu lost it completely, laughing so hard she spun in the air.

Positivity Everywhere

Despite the chaos—or perhaps because of it—the palace felt brighter.

Servants helped one another without snapping. Guards laughed off small accidents. Even the stern stewards seemed less sharp-tongued than usual.

In the distance, musicians tested instruments for the festival. The sound of strings and flutes floated through the air, light and hopeful.

Lian An watched it all, her expression softening.

"The darkness is gone," she said quietly.

Li Shen nodded. "At least for now."

Wei Rong folded his arms. "Whatever was pressing on this place has retreated."

Fen Yu tilted her head. "Or hiding."

Lian An didn't reply, but her gaze sharpened.

She knew better than to believe peace lasted forever.

Still...

For this morning, the palace was alive with warmth and purpose. Women worked on their crafts. Servants hurried with smiles. Guards joked while decorating.

And above it all, sunlight shimmered like a blessing.

"Alright," Lian An said firmly, turning to the ghosts. "Enough mischief. Help me instead."

Fen Yu pouted. "That was helping."

"I mean," Lian An continued, "no more tripping guards or pulling hair."

Wei Rong sighed. "You're no fun."

"But," she added, "you can help Princess Zhi by keeping her calm."

Fen Yu brightened instantly. "Say no more."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "We'll behave."

Wei Rong cracked his knuckles. "Mostly."

Lian An shook her head, but she was smiling.

As she walked back toward her chamber, the palace behind her buzzed with preparation, laughter, and life.

The festival was coming.

And for the first time in days, the palace felt ready.