

Ghost 216

Chapter 216: the palace breathes dark

The palace had always been vast, but that night, it felt... hollow.

The lanterns swayed gently in the corridors, their flames steady, yet the shadows behind them seemed to stretch longer than usual, clinging to the walls as if reluctant to let go. Even the marble floors reflected light in a dull, muted way, as though something unseen had dimmed the palace's spirit.

Empress Lian An sat in her courtyard, fingers resting loosely on the arm of her chair. The air felt thick. Heavy. Like the moment before a storm that never came.

She frowned.

Something was wrong.

Not visibly wrong—no screams, no blood, no sudden chaos—but a suffocating stillness that pressed against her skin. Even the wind had grown quiet. The usual chirping of night insects had faded, replaced by a strange, humming silence.

Her chest tightened.

"I don't like this," she murmured.

Beside her, the three ghosts hovered uneasily.

Fen Yu hugged her arms around herself, her usually dramatic expression replaced by genuine unease.

"Why does it feel like someone poured cold water down my spine?" she whispered. "Even my ghost skin feels heavy."

Wei Rong, the general ghost, stood straighter, eyes narrowed as he scanned the shadows.

"This place... it's wrong tonight. The air pressure is off. I can't sense danger clearly, but my instincts are screaming."

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, closed his eyes and concentrated. His expression slowly tightened.

"There is a disturbance in the palace's spiritual flow. The qi lines are unstable. It's as if something is... stirring."

Lian An felt it too.

Her limbs were slightly heavy, like she had not slept enough. Her temples throbbed faintly, and an unfamiliar drowsiness tugged at the back of her mind.

"Why am I suddenly sleepy?" she muttered. "I wasn't tired just now."

Fen Yu nodded frantically.

"Me too! I feel like lying down and never waking up. This is not normal!"

Wei Rong clenched his fists.

"This is dangerous. Something is suppressing spiritual awareness."

The lanterns flickered.

For a brief second, the light dimmed.

Lian An's heart skipped.

Around the palace, faint whispers drifted through corridors.

Servants who passed by murmured nervously.

"Did you feel that chill just now?"

"I thought someone was behind me..."

"The palace feels strange tonight..."

"I heard something move in the garden, but there was no one..."

Even the guards shifted uneasily at their posts, hands tightening on their spears, glancing into corners where shadows pooled unnaturally.

Lian An stood slowly.

"This energy... it's making me uncomfortable."

Li Shen stepped closer to her, worry etched into his usually composed face.

"This is not natural fatigue. It's suppression. Something is draining the surrounding spiritual energy."

Fen Yu tugged at Lian An's sleeve.

"Don't go anywhere alone tonight. Please."

Lian An hesitated.

Her heart felt restless. The suffocating stillness pressed against her chest, making it hard to breathe. She needed air. Fresh wind. Space.

"Maybe I should take a short walk near the lake," she said. "The breeze there always clears my head."

The three ghosts froze.

Fen Yu nearly wailed.

"NO! Absolutely not!"

Wei Rong's voice hardened.

"The lake is where you nearly drowned before. You were possessed there. The spiritual lines converge around that area. If something is active tonight, that place is the most dangerous."

Li Shen nodded gravely.

"The lake sits atop an old energy node. The monk warned that hidden mechanisms and arrays beneath the palace can awaken. If something is stirring tonight, the lake area will amplify it."

Lian An frowned.

"Then what do you suggest? I feel like my head is going to explode if I stay here."

Li Shen thought for a moment.

"We should meditate. Stabilize our qi. Strengthen our spiritual awareness. Whatever is suppressing us cannot fully affect those who guard their minds."

Fen Yu nodded eagerly.

"Yes! Let's cultivate! If we become stronger, nothing weird can touch us!"

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"It's safer to remain within the courtyard. The palace guards pass by here regularly."

Lian An exhaled slowly.

Meditation sounded sensible.

But her chest still felt tight.

"I just need a little breeze," she said softly. "I won't go far. Just a few steps outside the courtyard. I'll be back in minutes."

Fen Yu's eyes widened.

"You said that last time too."

Lian An rolled her eyes.

"I'm not going to jump into the lake. Relax."

Li Shen moved to block her path.

"If you must go, at least let us accompany you."

She shook her head.

"You three look half-asleep. Go cultivate. You'll feel better after stabilizing your energy. I'll take a short walk and return."

Wei Rong's jaw tightened.

"I don't like this."

Lian An smiled weakly.

"You worry too much."

Despite their protests, she stepped out of the courtyard.

The moment her foot crossed the threshold, the air changed.

The palace corridor felt colder.

The lanterns seemed dimmer.

The wind brushed against her skin, sending a faint shiver down her spine.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

Why does it suddenly feel so cold?

The night was still. Too still.

Her footsteps echoed softly against the stone path as she walked toward the lake's direction—not directly, but along the garden path that curved near it.

The moon hung high above, pale and distant.

She inhaled deeply.

The air smelled faintly of damp earth and lotus leaves.

For a moment, her chest loosened.

See? It's fine. I was just overthinking.

Then—

A sudden chill crawled up her spine.

Her steps slowed.

The sensation was unmistakable.

Someone was behind her.

She stopped walking.

The sound of her own breath felt too loud.

Slowly... she turned her head.

The path behind her was empty.

Lanterns glowed softly along the corridor.

No footsteps.

No shadow.

No presence.

She swallowed.

"Stop imagining things," she muttered to herself.

She turned forward again.

Her heart skipped.

The garden seemed... longer than before.

The path stretched slightly farther than it should have.

Her steps felt heavier.

Each footfall echoed unnaturally.

She felt as if the air thickened with every breath.

Suddenly—

A whisper brushed past her ear.

So faint she almost thought it was wind.

Her body went rigid.

She spun around.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

Only the distant rustle of leaves.

Her pulse pounded.

She forced herself to calm down.

It's just your nerves.

But her instincts screamed danger.

She took a step backward.

Her heel bumped against something cold.

She looked down.

Water.

She had wandered closer to the lake than she realized.

The moonlight reflected off the surface, silver and still.

Her breath hitched.

The lake.

Why am I here?

A strange dizziness washed over her.

The world tilted slightly.

Her vision blurred at the edges.

For a split second, she felt... light.

As if her body wasn't fully her own.

Her fingers twitched.

Her feet shifted forward on their own.

"No—" she whispered, forcing herself to stop.

She clenched her fists.

Her nails dug into her palms.

Pain grounded her.

She took a step back.

Then another.

Her heart pounded violently.

Something... tried to pull me.

She staggered away from the lake, breath uneven.

Behind her, the water remained calm.

Too calm.

As if nothing had happened.

She turned and hurried back toward her courtyard.

Her steps quickened.

Her chest burned.

The moment she crossed the threshold back into her courtyard—

The heaviness lifted slightly.

The suffocating pressure eased.

She leaned against the doorframe, breathing hard.

Inside, the three ghosts sat cross-legged, cultivating.

Fen Yu opened her eyes first.

"You're back?!" She rushed toward her. "You're pale! What happened?"

Lian An shook her head, still catching her breath.

"I... something felt wrong near the lake."

Wei Rong stood immediately.

"Did you feel pulled?"

She nodded slowly.

Li Shen's face darkened.

"That confirms it. Something is active tonight. And it's targeting you."

Fen Yu clutched Lian An's sleeve.

"You're not allowed to go out alone again. Ever. Do you hear me?"

Lian An managed a weak smile.

"Fine. I learned my lesson."

She sat down, heart still racing.

The palace outside remained eerily quiet.

But now she knew.

The darkness was awake.

And it was watching her.