

Ghost 217

Chapter 217: dead night

That night, the palace breathed in exhaustion.

From the highest pavilion to the lowest servant quarters, an unusual heaviness settled over the entire imperial compound. The lanterns flickered weakly, their flames dimmer than usual, as though even fire itself felt tired.

Maidservants moved slowly through corridors, yawning behind their sleeves.

"I don't know why," one whispered to another, "but today felt longer than any other day."

"Me too," the second replied, rubbing her eyes. "My legs feel heavy. Even walking feels like climbing a mountain."

"Is it because of the festival preparations?"

"Maybe... but this tiredness feels strange."

Even the guards leaned against pillars for a brief moment longer than they were allowed. Their eyes stung with drowsiness, though none of them had worked harder than usual.

The palace had never felt like this before.

A suffocating sleepiness spread like invisible mist.

The Empress Courtyard — Silence Before the Fall

In the Empress's courtyard, the air felt thick and unmoving.

The three ghosts hovered near the roof beams, unusually quiet.

Fen Yu yawned, rubbing her eyes.

"I feel... so sleepy... Why does it feel like my soul is sinking into cotton?"

Wei Rong frowned.

"This isn't normal. I don't feel danger, but my mind feels heavy."

Li Shen tried to circulate his spiritual energy, but his movements slowed.

"The spiritual flow is being suppressed again... This is deliberate."

Lian An watched them with concern.

"You three look terrible," she murmured. "Maybe you should rest."

Fen Yu floated down weakly.

"Rest sounds good... Just a short nap..."

Before Lian An could stop her, Fen Yu slumped onto a beam, her ghostly form dimming as she fell into sleep.

Wei Rong shook his head, forcing himself to remain upright, but his eyelids drooped.

"I will... guard..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

His figure flickered and settled into stillness, ghostly eyes closed.

Li Shen tried to stay conscious longer. He clenched his fists, attempted to recite calming mantras, but the invisible pressure weighed on him like a mountain.

"This is... dangerous..."

His vision darkened.

Moments later, even the scholar ghost drifted into an unnatural sleep.

Lian An stared at them in alarm.

This has never happened before.

A wave of drowsiness washed over her.

Her eyelids grew heavy.

She shook her head hard.

No. I shouldn't sleep now.

But her limbs felt weak. The quiet of the courtyard pressed into her ears. The lantern light blurred. The silence wrapped around her like a blanket.

She sat on her bed, intending to rest for a moment.

Just for a moment...

Midnight — The Empress Walks Without Waking

The moon climbed high.

In the Empress's courtyard, every living being slept.

Even the cats lay curled into small, warm balls near the door.

Lian An lay on her bed, breathing evenly.

Then—

Her fingers twitched.

Her eyelids fluttered, but did not open.

Her body rose slowly, unnaturally, as if pulled by invisible strings.

She stepped down from the bed.

Barefoot.

Her feet touched the cold stone floor.

She did not react.

Her eyes remained closed.

She walked toward the door.

Fen Yu stirred.

She heard faint murmuring.

Her ghostly eyes snapped open.

"Sister An...?"

She saw the Empress walking toward the exit.

"WAIT—!"

Fen Yu rushed forward, grabbing Lian An's arm.

Her hand passed through her.

She froze.

"Wei Rong! Li Shen! WAKE UP!"

The general ghost jolted awake, followed by the scholar.

They stared in horror as Lian An walked forward, unresponsive.

"She's being pulled!" Wei Rong roared.

Li Shen activated his spiritual energy, forming a barrier in front of her.

The barrier shattered instantly.

The force pulling her was far stronger than theirs.

Fen Yu tried again, using all her strength.

Her ghostly form trembled violently.

"It's no use!" she cried. "Something stronger is pulling her soul!"

Lian An continued walking.

Her steps were slow but unstoppable.

Her expression was blank.

Her body moved like a puppet.

The three ghosts chased her out of the courtyard, panic spreading through them.

"We have to wake someone!" Wei Rong shouted.

"No one else can see us!" Fen Yu screamed. "And everyone else is asleep!"

Li Shen's voice shook.

"The lake... it's pulling her toward the lake again."

They tried shouting her name.

"Lian An!"

"Wake up!"

"Stop!"

She did not hear them.

Her feet carried her forward, step by step, toward the dark water.

Elsewhere — Prince Liang's Unease

Prince Liang couldn't sleep.

He had turned in his bed for hours, restless and uneasy.

The palace felt strange tonight.

The air was thick. Heavy. Oppressive.

He finally rose, draping a robe over his shoulders.

"I need some air," he muttered.

He stepped outside his chamber and walked along the moonlit path.

The night was eerily quiet.

Even the insects were silent.

As he neared the garden path close to the lake, he noticed a familiar figure walking ahead.

His steps slowed.

"Empress...?" he whispered.

She walked barefoot, her long hair loose, her steps steady but unnatural.

"Your Majesty?" he called softly.

She did not turn.

Something felt wrong.

"Empress!" he raised his voice.

Still no response.

A chill ran down his spine.

Why is she walking alone? Barefoot? At this hour?

He hurried forward.

"Empress, wait!"

She reached the edge of the lake.

Time seemed to freeze.

"No—!" Prince Liang shouted, breaking into a run.

But before he could reach her—

She stepped forward.

And disappeared into the water.

The Lake — Chaos in Silence

The splash echoed loudly through the still night.

Prince Liang's blood turned cold.

He rushed to the edge.

"HELP!" he shouted instinctively, but the palace remained eerily quiet.

The water rippled violently.

The moon reflected broken silver on the surface.

The three ghosts screamed.

"She jumped!"

"No—this is the second time!"

"This is not coincidence!"

Fen Yu sobbed, trying to dive into the lake despite being a ghost.

Wei Rong cursed loudly.

Li Shen's face turned pale.

"She's being targeted. Someone is controlling her."

Prince Liang tore off his robe and jumped into the water without hesitation.

The cold water swallowed him.

He swam desperately, searching for her.

His heart pounded wildly.

If she dies... the Emperor will...

He pushed deeper.

Finally, he caught her arm.

Her body was limp.

Her face pale under the moonlight.

He dragged her upward with all his strength, coughing as he reached the surface.

He hauled her onto the bank, his chest heaving.

"Empress... Empress, wake up!"

The cold night wind cut across the lake, rippling the dark surface of the water. Moonlight scattered across the waves like shattered glass. Prince Liang knelt at the edge of the stone bank, his arms wrapped tightly around the Empress's soaked body.

Her face was pale. Too pale.

"Empress... wake up," he whispered urgently, pressing his ear to her chest.

Her heartbeat was faint.

Too faint.

Fear surged through him like ice.

"Wake up!" he called, louder now, his voice breaking. "Your Majesty—please wake up!"

She did not respond.

Her lips were blue from the cold. Water dripped from her hair onto the stone floor.

Prince Liang's hands trembled as he pressed against her chest, trying to warm her, rubbing her arms to bring back circulation.

Her heartbeat fluttered weakly beneath his palm.

"It's slowing..." he murmured, dread filling his chest.

He lifted his head and shouted into the night:

"HELP! SOMEONE WAKE UP! THE EMPRESS HAS FALLEN INTO THE LAKE!"

The shout echoed across the quiet palace grounds.

Lanterns flickered on.

Doors opened.

Footsteps rushed from all directions.

Maids ran out of courtyards, clutching shawls to their shoulders. Guards hurried from the gates, confused and alarmed.

"Wh-what happened?!"

"Why is everyone shouting?"

"Isn't that the Empress by the lake?!"

Murmurs spread instantly.

"She jumped into the lake—!"

"Prince Liang saved her!"

"Did the Empress try to commit suicide?!"

"How could that be? She was just recovering!"

Whispers turned into chaos.

Prince Liang glared at the gathering crowd, his voice sharp with urgency.

"Stop staring! Someone bring blankets! Call the healer—NOW!"

A maid snapped out of her shock and ran.

Another guard tore off his outer robe and covered the Empress.

Her eyelashes fluttered faintly, but she did not wake.

Prince Liang's heart pounded violently.

If she dies... the Emperor will never forgive me.

He pressed his forehead to hers, his voice hoarse.

"Don't die... not here... not like this..."

The Emperor — An Unnatural Sleep

Elsewhere in the palace, the Emperor sat at his desk, reviewing reports.

Or rather—he had been.

At some point, his eyelids had grown heavy.

He had never fallen asleep while working. Never.

Yet tonight, his head drooped forward, resting on his arm.

Ink dried on the brush in his hand.

The candle flame wavered.

His sleep was deep. Too deep.

Suddenly—

Noise pierced the fog in his mind.

Shouts.

Footsteps.

Murmurs.

His eyes snapped open.

His heart skipped a beat.

Why... did I fall asleep?

He stood abruptly, dizziness washing over him.

The palace was unusually noisy at this hour.

He stepped outside his chamber.

A stream of servants and guards rushed past him toward the direction of the lake.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

A maid stopped, kneeling in panic.

"Your Majesty—!" Her voice trembled. "The Empress... the Empress jumped into the lake! Prince Liang saved her!"

The Emperor's blood turned to ice.

"What?"

The world tilted.

For a moment, he could not breathe.

"She—what did you say?"

The maid's head trembled against the ground.

"Your Majesty... the Empress fell into the lake at night... Prince Liang pulled her out..."

The Emperor did not wait to hear the rest.

He turned and ran.

The Lake — The Emperor Arrives

The crowd parted instinctively as the Emperor approached the lake.

Lantern light illuminated the scene: the Empress lying unconscious on the stone bank, wrapped in soaked cloth; Prince Liang kneeling beside her, his face tight with fear; servants holding blankets; guards standing rigid.

The Emperor's steps slowed.

His chest tightened painfully.

Lian An...

He knelt beside her, brushing wet hair from her pale face.

"She's cold," he said hoarsely. "Why is she cold?"

Prince Liang looked up, guilt heavy in his eyes.

"I found her walking here like she wasn't awake," he said. "She didn't respond. She walked straight into the lake. I pulled her out, but... her heartbeat was faint."

The Emperor clenched his fists.

"She was sleepwalking?" His voice was low and dangerous. "Or... someone pushed her?"

Prince Liang hesitated.

"I don't know. But this didn't feel normal."

The Emperor placed two fingers on her wrist.

Her pulse was weak—but still there.

Relief and rage crashed together inside him.

"Bring the healer. Now," he commanded.

Servants rushed away.

The Emperor lifted the Empress into his arms without hesitation.

Her body was light. Too light.

Water dripped from her clothes onto his sleeves.

He held her tightly, as though afraid she would disappear if he loosened his grip.

"Move," he ordered coldly.

The crowd parted.

Whispers followed them like shadows.

"She tried to die..."

"Why would the Empress do that?"

"Prince Liang saved her..."

"The Emperor looks furious..."

The Emperor did not hear them.

His entire world narrowed to the pale woman in his arms.

The Palace Holds Its Breath

As the Emperor carried the Empress toward her chamber, the palace remained awake in tense silence.

Lanterns burned brighter.

Servants whispered prayers.

Guards tightened their grip on their spears.

Something dark had brushed against the heart of the palace that night.

And everyone felt it.