

Ghost 158

Chapter 158: shatter peace at noon

Sunlight poured softly into the Empress's courtyard, filtering through bamboo screens and falling in warm patterns across the low table set for lunch.

For once, the palace felt... quiet.

The Empress sat opposite the Emperor, steam rising gently from the dishes between them. The food was simple—rice, clear soup, sautéed vegetables, and sliced meat—but it carried the unmistakable warmth of something cooked with care.

The Emperor picked up his chopsticks, glanced at her, then said lightly, "You're improving."

She raised an eyebrow. "In cooking or obedience?"

He almost choked on his soup.

"I meant cooking," he said quickly. "Though you've always been... skilled."

She snorted softly and continued eating.

For a few moments, neither spoke. It wasn't awkward—just unfamiliar. They had shared countless meals in name, but very few like this, without servants hovering too close, without politics pressing between every word.

Finally, the Emperor spoke again, his tone lower.

"What happened in the forest," he said, "with the sigil... that wasn't ordinary."

The Empress's chopsticks paused for a fraction of a second. "No."

"You felt it too," he continued. "That power. That clarity. Facing something inside yourself."

She looked up at him. "You did as well."

He nodded slowly. "Fear. Regret. Things I buried under duty." His gaze sharpened. "And you?"

She answered honestly, "Loneliness. And anger."

Silence settled again, heavier this time.

"The ghost-human breeding," the Emperor said at last, voice grave, "it's real. Not just barbaric superstition."

"Yes," the Empress replied. "And it's organized. The barbaric clan was only a surface."

His jaw tightened. "Which means this isn't just a border problem. It's a rot spreading quietly."

She met his eyes. "That's why the shaman gave me the book. And why it activated only when all of you were present."

He studied her carefully. "You didn't tell me everything."

"No," she said calmly. "But I didn't lie either."

To his surprise, he didn't feel anger—only a strange acceptance.

"You've changed," he said quietly.

"So have you," she replied.

He gave a small, crooked smile. "I suppose enlightenment does that to people."

Just then—

The courtyard gate flew open.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!"

A maid came running in, face pale, breath uneven. She dropped to her knees so abruptly her hairpin clattered to the stone.

The Empress stood instantly. "What happened?"

"It's—Princess Zhi," the maid gasped. "Something happened in her courtyard."

The Emperor was already on his feet. "Speak clearly."

"She collapsed," the maid said, voice trembling. "She was laughing one moment, and the next she clutched her stomach and fell. There's blood—just a little—but she won't wake up."

The Empress's heart slammed hard against her ribs.

"How long ago?"

"Moments," the maid replied. "The physicians are on their way, but—"

The Empress didn't wait to hear the rest.

She lifted her skirts and moved, fast and decisive. The Emperor followed without hesitation, his expression darkening with every step.

As they hurried through the corridors, the Empress's mind raced.

Eight months pregnant.

Sudden collapse.

Blood.

This isn't normal.

And somewhere deep inside, the power she had awakened stirred uneasily—

as if warning her that this was not merely an accident.

Not at all.

Continuation — A Split Second Decision

The moment they reached the turn toward Princess Zhi's courtyard, the Emperor stopped.

He caught the Empress's wrist—not hard, but firm enough to anchor her racing steps.

"Go ahead," he said, voice sharp with command and concern. "Check on her first."

She looked up at him, startled.

"I'll bring the healer myself," he continued. "Don't wait for us. If something is wrong, you'll see it before anyone else."

For a heartbeat, their eyes locked.

This wasn't an order spoken as an emperor.

It was trust.

The Empress nodded once. "Be quick."

She turned and ran, skirts gathered in her hands, moving faster than any court lady ever should. The corridor echoed with hurried footsteps as servants scrambled out of her way.

Behind her, the Emperor was already striding in the opposite direction, voice ringing through the halls.

"Summon the imperial healer—now. And bring the midwife. Immediately."

Servants scattered like startled birds.

As the Empress crossed the threshold into Princess Zhi's courtyard, her chest tightened.

Whatever was waiting inside...

she knew this moment would change everything.

The Empress froze at the entrance.

The world seemed to tilt.

Blood.

A dark, spreading pool soaked into the stone floor near the bed, sharp and metallic in scent. It stained the hem of Princess Zhi's robe, crept beneath the furniture, and marked the path where servants had clearly panicked and then fled for help.

For half a breath, Lian An couldn't move.

Then instinct took over.

"Zhi—!" she rushed forward, dropping to her knees beside the bed. "Princess Zhi, wake up! Look at me!"

Princess Zhi lay pale as paper, her lips tinged faintly blue, sweat plastering damp hair to her temples. Her eyes fluttered weakly but did not fully open. One hand was clenched tightly against her swollen belly, the other limp at her side.

"Zhi... it's me," the Empress said, voice steady only by force. She gently shook her shoulder, then immediately stopped, afraid of hurting her. "Can you hear me?"

A faint sound escaped Princess Zhi's throat—more breath than voice.

Pain.

Severe pain.

Lian An's heart slammed against her ribs. This isn't normal. At eight months, this much blood—this sudden collapse—

Her mind raced, fast and sharp.

She pressed two fingers lightly to Princess Zhi's wrist. The pulse was weak, uneven, fluttering like a trapped bird.

"Stay with me," she murmured, leaning close. "You're not alone. Don't close your eyes."

Princess Zhi's lashes trembled. A tear slid from the corner of her eye.

"Sister..." she whispered, barely audible. "It... hurts..."

"I know," Lian An said immediately, brushing damp hair from her face. "I'm here. The Emperor is bringing the healer. Just breathe with me."

She raised her voice without turning around. "Someone! Clean cloths—now! Hot water! And don't move her!"

A maid who had been frozen in terror jolted into motion, rushing toward the door.

The Empress tore a strip of fabric from her own sleeve and pressed it firmly but carefully where the bleeding was worst, her hands already slick with blood. She ignored the warmth, the smell, the way her stomach twisted.

Focus.

This wasn't the palace.

This wasn't politics.

This was a woman she loved—alone, frightened, bleeding.

"Zhi," she said again, lowering her voice, anchoring it. "Listen to me. You're strong. You've come this far. Your child needs you to stay awake."

Princess Zhi's fingers twitched weakly, brushing against the Empress's sleeve as if clinging to a lifeline.

Footsteps thundered outside.

Voices shouted.

The Empress didn't look back.

She kept her eyes on Princess Zhi's face, on the faint rise and fall of her chest, and silently prayed—

not as an empress,

not as a strategist,

but as a woman begging the world not to take another person she loved.

"Hold on," she whispered.

"Please... just hold on."

The sound of hurried footsteps finally burst into the chamber.

The healer arrived first, robes disheveled, breath uneven from running. Behind him came the midwife, older, experienced, her face already pale before she even reached the bed. Servants crowded at the doorway, too afraid to step closer, whispering prayers under their breath.

The Emperor followed moments later.

The instant he saw the blood, his face drained of color.

"Move," he commanded, his voice sharp but shaken.

They parted immediately.

The healer knelt beside the bed and did not waste time with pleasantries. He checked Princess Zhi's pulse, pressed fingers against her abdomen, listened to her shallow breathing, then looked at the blood-soaked cloth in the Empress's hands.

His brows drew together.

Too much blood.

Too sudden.

Too late.

He checked again—more urgently now—then slowly, painfully, shook his head.

The room fell silent.

The midwife stepped forward, her movements steady but grim. She examined Princess Zhi with practiced hands, her lips tightening with every second.

After a long, unbearable pause... she also shook her head.

The Empress felt the world crack.

The healer stood up slowly, his voice low, heavy with finality.

"Your Majesty..." he said to the Emperor, unable to meet his eyes. "The child... there is no heartbeat."

Princess Zhi's body gave a weak twitch, as if she sensed the truth even before the words fully landed.

"No..." the Empress whispered, her hands trembling as she tightened her grip on the cloth. "No, check again. Please—check again."

The healer closed his eyes briefly, then forced himself to continue.

"The bleeding indicates placental rupture. Even if the child were alive moments ago... it could not have survived this much blood loss."

The Emperor stood frozen.

His hands clenched into fists so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"And the Princess?" he asked, his voice dangerously calm.

The healer hesitated.

Then spoke the words that felt like a blade.

"To save Her Highness... we must operate. Immediately."

Operate.

The word echoed through the chamber like a death sentence.

The midwife nodded grimly. "If we delay even a little longer, she will bleed to death."

Princess Zhi let out a broken sob.

"My... baby..." she murmured, tears sliding helplessly down her temples. "My child..."

The Empress bent over her instantly, her own eyes burning. She cupped Princess Zhi's face gently, pressing her forehead against hers.

"Zhi," she said, voice shaking but firm, "listen to me. Look at me."

Princess Zhi's eyes found hers, unfocused and drowning in grief.

"You are alive," the Empress said fiercely. "You are here. That matters. We will not lose you too."

Princess Zhi's lips trembled. "I wanted... to protect him..."

"You did," Lian An said without hesitation. "You carried him. You loved him. That love doesn't disappear."

The healer cleared his throat softly, urgency returning.

"Your Majesty," he said again to the Emperor, "we must begin now."

The Emperor finally moved.

He stepped forward, his gaze falling on his sister—so pale, so fragile, her body barely holding on. For a moment, something raw and human crossed his face.

Then he straightened.

"Do it," he said hoarsely. "Save her. No matter the cost."

Princess Zhi's fingers suddenly tightened around the Empress's sleeve.

"Sister..." she whispered, panic surging. "Don't leave me..."

"I'm not going anywhere," the Empress said immediately. "I'll be right here."

The midwife gently but firmly intervened. "Your Majesty... you cannot stay during the procedure."

The Empress looked up sharply. "Then let me help."

The healer hesitated, shocked. "This is—"

"I know what blood looks like," she said coldly. "And I won't faint."

The Emperor looked at her, surprised—then slowly nodded.

"Let her stay," he ordered.

Servants were dismissed. Doors were shut. Water was boiled. Instruments laid out.

As they lifted Princess Zhi onto her side, her cries turned weak, exhausted, torn between pain and grief.

The Empress held her hand tightly.

Outside the chamber, the palace held its breath.

Inside, under flickering lantern light and the weight of irreversible loss, they began the fight—not for a child already gone—

but for the life that still remained.