

Ghost 218

Chapter 218: between breathe and silence

The Emperor carried the Empress through the palace corridors, lantern light trembling against the walls. Every step felt heavier than the last.

Her body was cold in his arms.

Too cold.

As they reached her chamber, brighter lamps revealed what the darkness had hidden.

Blood.

A thin trail of blood ran from her temple, soaking into her wet hair.

His breath caught.

Her face had turned ashen, lips drained of color. Her chest rose so faintly it was almost imperceptible.

Her heartbeat... is fading.

For the first time in his life, fear wrapped around the Emperor's heart like a tightening vice.

He laid her gently on the bed.

"Call the healer again!" he barked.

Servants scrambled, their faces pale with terror.

He brushed her hair away from her face with trembling fingers.

"Stay with me," he whispered harshly, his voice barely steady. "You are not allowed to die. Not tonight."

Her eyelashes fluttered weakly, but her eyes did not open.

The Healer Arrives

The palace healer rushed in, his robes disheveled, sweat on his brow. He knelt beside the bed, fingers already pressing against her pulse, eyes scanning the wound on her head.

"She struck her head against the stone edge of the lake," he said grimly. "There is blood loss... and cold has entered her body."

He quickly cleaned the wound, pressing soft cloth against her temple.

"Hot water!" he ordered. "Now!"

Maids rushed to obey.

The healer crushed herbs, mixing medicine with warm liquid, then gently pried open the Empress's lips to feed her a few drops.

"Change her into dry woolen clothes," he instructed. "Wrap her in blankets. Do not let her body grow cold."

Servants worked in frantic coordination.

The Emperor stood at the bedside, fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white.

He had seen blood on battlefields.

He had seen death kneel before him.

But never had fear cut this deep.

A Verdict from Heaven

After finishing his urgent treatment, the healer wiped his hands and slowly stood.

He glanced at the Emperor, hesitated, then gestured toward the door.

"Your Majesty... please step outside."

The Emperor followed him into the corridor, his steps heavy, his mind numb.

The healer bowed deeply.

"Her condition is... critical," he said softly. "I have stopped the bleeding and warmed her body, but she lost too much warmth and strength. Whether she wakes... depends on Heaven."

The words struck like thunder.

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"Depends on Heaven?" His voice was low, dangerous. "What does that mean?"

"I have done all I can," the healer said, trembling. "Now we can only pray her spirit returns to her body."

The Emperor's blood boiled.

He stepped forward, grabbing the healer by the collar and lifting him off the ground with one hand.

"If anything happens to her," he said coldly, his eyes blazing, "you will die with her."

The healer's face drained of color.

"Y-Your Majesty—p-please calm down! I will stay outside her chamber! I will check her pulse every moment! I swear on my life!"

The Emperor stared at him for a long heartbeat.

Then he released him violently.

The healer stumbled backward, collapsing to his knees, trembling uncontrollably.

"I will do everything," he vowed hoarsely. "I will not leave her side."

A Silent Vigil

The Emperor returned to the Empress's bedside.

She lay motionless beneath thick blankets, her breathing shallow, her face pale like porcelain.

He sat beside her, taking her cold hand in his.

His voice was low, almost broken.

"You are not allowed to leave," he murmured. "You haven't even scolded me properly yet... You haven't finished being stubborn."

The palace fell into tense silence.

Lanterns burned through the night.

And the Emperor did not move.

The night stretched endlessly.

Oil lamps burned low, their flames flickering weakly, casting long shadows across the Empress's chamber. The air was heavy with the scent of medicine, blood, and damp silk.

The Emperor had not moved from the bedside.

He did not sit.

He stood.

As if sitting would mean surrendering.

The healer moved in and out of the room all night, changing cloths, checking her pulse, feeding drops of medicine between her pale lips. Each time he checked, his brows furrowed deeper.

"She is still breathing," he reported quietly at one point. "But her soul feels... distant."

The Emperor did not respond.

His eyes were fixed on her face.

Still. Too still.

Ghosts Who Could Not Cross That Line

Hovering near the bed, three figures trembled.

Fen Yu clutched her hands together, eyes red.

Wei Rong stood rigid, fists clenched, face dark with helpless fury.

Li Shen floated near the window, his usually calm expression cracked with fear.

They tried everything.

Fen Yu leaned close, her voice breaking.

"Lian An... wake up. You scolded me just yesterday. You said I was stupid for trusting men. If you sleep now, who will scold me?"

No response.

Wei Rong called her name loudly, his voice echoing with ghostly resonance, trying to reach her soul.

"Empress! Wake up! You still owe me food! You promised to cook dumplings again! You cannot die without paying your debt!"

Nothing.

Li Shen closed his eyes, using what little spiritual power he had to reach toward her fading presence.

"I can't touch her soul," he whispered hoarsely. "Something is pulling her... something stronger than us."

Fen Yu began to cry openly.

"She is the only one who can see us. The only one who listens to us. The only one who treats us like family... I don't want to lose her..."

The three ghosts hovered helplessly as dawn light crept into the room.

They had fought demons.

They had battled dark spirits.

But this... they could not fight.

Morning Brings Rumors

As the first sunlight touched the palace roofs, news spread like wildfire.

"The Empress tried to drown herself." "She was saved by Prince Liang." "She is on the verge of death."

Whispers slithered through corridors.

In the Dowager's courtyard, the Dowager Empress froze when she heard.

"She jumped into the lake?" Her cup trembled in her hand. "How can she be so foolish? How could such a thing happen inside the palace?"

Her face was pale with shock, but her eyes burned with unease.

Something is wrong. Very wrong.

Beside her, Lady Chen's expression flickered.

Inside her heart, a cold satisfaction bloomed.

So she finally did it herself.

"She was weak from the plague," Lady Chen said softly, lowering her eyes. "Perhaps her heart couldn't bear it anymore."

But behind the veil of concern, her thoughts were far from gentle.

If she dies, everything will be simpler.

Princess Zhi's Tears

In her own courtyard, Princess Zhi heard the news and went deathly pale.

"She... she jumped into the lake?" Her fingers tightened around her teacup. "That's impossible. She was just with me yesterday. She smiled... she told me to rest well..."

She immediately ordered her maid to prepare tonics, warm blankets, and nourishing soups.

Ignoring her own weakness, she rushed to the Empress's chamber.

When she entered, her steps faltered.

The Empress lay motionless, face pale, hair damp against her cheeks. The room smelled of bitter medicine.

Princess Zhi's eyes filled with tears.

She placed the tonic gently on the table, then spread a warm blanket over the Empress's cold body.

"Please wake up," she whispered. "You said you would find justice for my child. You said you would stay with me... Don't leave me alone again..."

Her voice trembled.

Unable to bear it, Princess Zhi turned and went to the palace shrine.

She knelt before the cold stone altar, hands clasped tightly.

"Gods above," she prayed softly, tears falling onto the floor. "If you must take someone... take my strength instead. Let her live. She is kinder than I will ever be."

The Emperor's Silent Breakdown

Back in the Empress's chamber, the Emperor finally sat.

He sat beside the bed and placed her cold hand against his cheek.

For the first time since ascending the throne, he felt powerless.

"I told you to be stubborn," he said hoarsely. "I told you to live no matter what. Why didn't you listen?"

The healer approached quietly.

"Your Majesty... her pulse is still weak, but stable. If she survives until sunset, her chances will improve."

The Emperor nodded, his voice low.

"If she wakes," he said, eyes dark, "I will find whoever did this to her. Even if they hide in heaven or hell."

The ghosts felt a chill.

They knew he meant it.

Rumors did not walk.

They flew.

By noon, the story had already left the palace walls.

By evening, it had crossed streets, markets, tea houses, taverns, and merchant caravans.

By nightfall, the entire capital believed they knew the truth.

And the truth they believed was not the truth at all.

The Story the Kingdom Told Itself

In the bustling market streets, tea shop storytellers whispered dramatically:

"I heard the Empress tried to drown herself because the Emperor doesn't love her."

Another voice chimed in, lowering their tone as if revealing a royal secret.

"Of course! Everyone knows the Emperor favors Lady Chen. The Empress was humiliated in front of the court."

A woman selling cloth shook her head.

"And the Dowager Empress? She punishes her every chance she gets. No family supports her in the palace."

A man sipping tea scoffed.

"If I were treated like that, I'd rather die too."

Soon, the story became more vivid with every retelling.

"The Dowager slapped her!" "The Emperor ignored her!" "She was abandoned and forced to learn embroidery like a servant!" "She was locked in her courtyard like a criminal!"

No one asked if it was true.

No one cared.

The tragedy of a woman trapped in the palace was far more delicious than the truth.

The Merchants Whisper

Caravans carried the story beyond the capital.

In inns on the trade routes:

"I heard the Empress is pitiful. The Emperor loves Lady Chen and ignores his wife."

"Royal marriages are never about love. Look what happened to her."

Even foreign merchants shook their heads in pity.

"The Great Empire's Empress tried to kill herself. What a shame."

In the Palace — The Lies Return to Their Source

Inside the palace, maids whispered behind sleeves.

"She must have been punished again by the Dowager." "I heard she was crying all night." "No wonder she jumped into the lake."

Even some guards believed it.

None of them knew about the dark force.

None of them knew about possession.

None of them knew that someone had pulled her soul toward the water.

All they saw was a woman who almost died.

And they decided her pain had a reason that suited their prejudice.