

Ghost 224

Chapter 224: the weight of whisper

The Dowager Empress had always believed that she was untouchable.

Not by blade.

Not by poison.

Not by rumor.

For decades she had ruled the inner palace with an iron hand wrapped in silk. Concubines bowed before her. Noble ladies feared her gaze. Even ministers measured their words carefully when speaking in her presence.

But that morning—

A whisper pierced her armor.

And it did not come from an enemy.

It came from the servants.

The Whisper That Slipped Through Walls

The Dowager sat upright in her chamber, jade bracelets clinking faintly as she lifted her tea. Her face was composed, unreadable. Only the faint crease between her brows betrayed her restless night.

Outside the carved wooden screen, two maids were sweeping the corridor.

Their voices were low.

Too low.

But not low enough.

"They say Her Majesty jumped because the Dowager tortured her..."

"Shh! Don't say that aloud!"

"But everyone in the outer court is saying it. That the Empress couldn't endure it anymore..."

"And that His Majesty loves Lady Chen more..."

"Poor Empress... she had no one."

The broom paused.

Footsteps shifted nervously.

The Dowager's fingers tightened around the porcelain cup.

Crack.

The sound was soft.

But in the quiet chamber, it felt loud.

The maid inside the room immediately fell to her knees.

"Your Majesty—"

"Silence."

The Dowager's voice was calm.

Too calm.

The maids outside froze as well, realizing too late that their whispers had traveled.

The Dowager did not call them in.

She did not punish them.

She simply sat there.

Listening to the echo of their words.

Torture.

The word lingered in the air like smoke.

Torture.

She had disciplined the Empress.

Yes.

She had scolded her.

Yes.

She had forced her to learn embroidery, to follow ancestral traditions, to kneel when rules were broken.

But torture?

Her jaw tightened.

She had endured worse in her own youth.

She had been sent to the palace as a young bride, surrounded by rivals who wanted her dead. She had swallowed humiliation for years. She had lost children. She had fought for her son's throne.

No one had called it torture then.

They called it strength.

So why now—

Was she the villain?

The Guilt She Did Not Expect

The Dowager rose slowly and walked toward the window.

The palace courtyard beyond was quiet. Too quiet.

She had not visited the Empress since the lake incident.

She had told herself it was dignity.

She had told herself it was distance.

She had told herself it was because the Emperor was already there, and her presence would only create tension.

But now—

She wondered.

Did that look like cruelty?

She had always believed the Empress was stubborn. Too independent. Too unconventional. Too unwilling to submit.

She did not like her.

That was true.

From the beginning, she had preferred Lady Chen.

Lady Chen was gentle.

Obedient.

Soft-spoken.

She understood palace etiquette. She knew how to bow, when to speak, when to remain silent.

She had been raised properly.

She was suitable.

The Empress, on the other hand—

Cooked like a commoner.

Argued like a street merchant.

Looked her in the eye when reprimanded.

The Dowager had mistaken defiance for disrespect.

Had she misjudged?

The thought unsettled her.

The Palace's Growing Story

By midday, more rumors reached her ears.

"They say the Dowager never accepted her..."

"They say she was forced to learn crochet while being mocked..."

"They say Lady Chen will become Empress if she dies..."

"They say the Emperor ignored her suffering..."

Each version became more twisted.

More dramatic.

More poisonous.

The Dowager felt a strange tightness in her chest.

This was no longer about preference.

This was about reputation.

About legacy.

If the Empress died—

History would not record "misunderstanding."

It would record cruelty.

It would say the Dowager Empress drove her daughter-in-law to suicide.

Her nails dug into her palm.

She had survived too much to have her name stained like this.

The Image That Would Not Leave

That night, she could not sleep.

Every time she closed her eyes—

She saw the Empress's pale face.

Still.

Unmoving.

She remembered the last time she had scolded her.

The tea cup shattering.

The shard cutting the girl's hand.

She remembered the way the Emperor had stepped forward protectively.

She remembered feeling annoyed at that.

Now—

That memory replayed differently.

Had she gone too far?

She had told herself discipline was necessary.

But what if discipline became isolation?

The Empress had no mother in the palace.

No elder guiding her gently.

Only rules.

Only expectations.

Only scrutiny.

The Dowager pressed her hand against her chest.

She had never intended for the girl to die.

Never.

Lady Chen — The Preferred One

She still believed Lady Chen was better suited to accompany her son.

Lady Chen was steady.

Predictable.

Political alliances favored her.

But preference was not execution.

Preference was not death.

She did not want the Empress gone.

She only wanted her shaped.

Controlled.

Proper.

Was that so wrong?

Yet—

The palace now whispered that she had broken the girl.

That she had pushed her into the lake.

And the Dowager, for the first time in years, felt something unfamiliar.

Not fear.

Not anger.

But guilt.

A thin crack in her armor.

Why She Had Not Visited

Why had she not gone to see her?

The question returned again and again.

Pride?

Perhaps.

Habit?

Likely.

She was not a woman who showed softness easily.

If she visited, the Empress might misunderstand it as weakness.

If she visited, the Emperor might think she admitted fault.

If she visited, the palace might see it as retreat.

But if she did not—

The palace would call her heartless.

She exhaled slowly.

She had navigated wars and coups.

Yet this—

A young woman on a bed—

Shook her more than battlefield reports ever had.

The Truth She Would Not Speak Aloud

She did not hate the Empress.

She simply did not trust her.

The girl was unpredictable.

Strong-willed.

Independent.

She had opened a restaurant.

Built influence among commoners.

Gained loyalty outside noble circles.

That kind of woman—

Was dangerous.

But also—

Impressive.

The Dowager's gaze hardened slightly.

If the Empress woke—

Perhaps...

Perhaps she would handle her differently.

Not softer.

But not as distant.

The palace was already unstable.

The monk had warned of dark forces.

Princess Zhi had lost her child.

Now the Empress nearly lost her life.

Something was wrong.

And if this was not suicide—

Then someone was moving pieces quietly.

The Dowager disliked being blind.

The Decision Forming

Near midnight, she finally spoke.

"Prepare my cloak."

The maid looked up in surprise.

"Your Majesty?"

"I will visit the Empress."

The maid froze for a second before bowing deeply.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Dowager stood tall.

Her back straight.

Her expression once again composed.

She would not show guilt.

She would not show regret.

But she would see the girl with her own eyes.

Because whether she liked her or not—

The Empress was still the woman who carried the Phoenix Seal.

And the palace would not fall into chaos under her watch.

Morning arrived quietly.

Too quietly.

There was no usual bustle in the palace corridors. No cheerful chatter of maids preparing trays. No sound of musicians practicing in distant courtyards.

The air itself felt heavy.

As if the entire palace was holding its breath.

The Dowager's Walk

The Dowager Empress stepped out of her chamber dressed in a deep indigo robe. Her face was composed, her posture straight, but her steps were slower than usual.

Behind her trailed two maids, careful and silent.

No announcement was made.

No drumbeat preceded her arrival.

She did not want attention.

She did not want ceremony.

As she approached the Empress's courtyard, she noticed something immediately.

Guards stood outside.

Duke family carriages were parked nearby.

Servants knelt with red eyes.

The atmosphere was thick with prayer and worry.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the beads in her hand.

She said nothing.

The Scene Inside

When she entered the courtyard, everyone immediately bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dowager Empress."

She lifted her hand faintly, signaling them to rise.

Her gaze swept across the scene.

Princess Zhi was seated on a small cushion near the chamber door, fingers moving slowly over rose prayer beads. Her lips murmured continuous chants, voice trembling but steady in faith.

The Duke stood straight but rigid, as if holding himself together through sheer force.

The Duchess sat nearby, eyes swollen from crying.

Lian Rou stood near the doorway, jaw tight, hands clenched.

And then—

Her eyes paused on unfamiliar faces.

A young woman with fierce eyes.

Two young men standing protectively beside her.

Another man she did not recognize.

They did not look like palace officials.

They looked like outsiders.

But this was not the time to question.

She raised her hand slightly.

"Enough."

The whispers stopped.

Without another word, she walked toward the chamber.

The Sight That Stilled Her Heart

The room smelled of herbs and damp cloth.

Windows were half-open, allowing morning light to spill gently across the bed.

The Empress lay there.

Pale.

Unmoving.

Her lips were colorless.

Her breathing shallow—so shallow that it seemed like each breath might be her last.

The Dowager froze for half a second.

This was not the spirited girl who argued about cooking being art.

This was not the stubborn daughter-in-law who refused to bow her head fully.

This was a child on the edge of death.

The Dowager stepped closer.

The healer stood aside nervously.

"Her Majesty's condition?" she asked quietly.

The healer bowed deeply.

"She has not regained consciousness, Your Majesty. Her pulse is weak... her body temperature unstable."

The Dowager did not respond immediately.

She looked at the Empress's face carefully.

The wound near her head had been cleaned, but faint bruising remained.

Her throat tightened unexpectedly.

This girl—

She had scolded her.

Humiliated her.

Compared her unfavorably to Lady Chen.

Forced her into embroidery she clearly struggled with.

But she had never wished death upon her.

Never.

The Dowager slowly reached out.

For a moment, she hesitated.

Then her fingers lightly touched the Empress's cold hand.

It was colder than she expected.

The skin felt fragile.

Her throat burned.

The Guilt She Could Not Speak

She remembered every harsh word she had spoken.

"You are mannerless."

"You shame the palace."

"Even children do better."

At the time, they felt justified.

Necessary corrections.

Now they echoed differently.

What if those words had weighed heavier than she thought?

What if the Empress had truly felt alone?

The Dowager swallowed hard.

She would never admit this aloud—

But she had underestimated her.

The girl had endured the palace, opened businesses, handled schemes, supported Princess Zhi.

And still—

She lay here, defenseless.

The Dowager stepped back slightly.

Her throat felt blocked.

As if something was lodged there.

But she did not cry.

She did not show weakness.

She simply looked at her longer than necessary.

Then she turned away.

Outside the Chamber

When she exited, the courtyard grew silent again.

Princess Zhi stopped chanting and looked up with hopeful eyes.

The Duchess held her breath.

The Duke waited.

The Emperor stood near the pillar, his face pale, exhaustion visible under his eyes.

The Dowager looked at her son.

For a brief moment, something passed between them.

Concern.

Fear.

Unspoken blame.

She broke the silence.

"The healer must remain here at all times."

Her voice was steady again.

"Double the guards. No one enters without permission."

She paused.

"And summon additional spiritual masters. Increase the purification rituals."

Her tone softened slightly, almost imperceptibly.

"She will not die."

It sounded less like a statement—

More like an order to fate itself.

The Emperor nodded faintly.

He could see something different in her expression.

Not anger.

Not superiority.

But unease.

The Walk Back

As she walked away from the courtyard, her steps were slower than before.

The maids followed at a distance.

She did not speak.

She did not scold.

She did not comment.

But inside her mind—

A storm brewed.

If the Empress died—

The palace would fracture.

The Duke would never forgive them.

The Emperor would never forgive himself.

And history would write her name in black ink.

She had survived political storms her entire life.

But this—

This felt personal.

Unsettling.

She reached her chamber and dismissed everyone.

Alone now, she sat heavily on the carved wooden chair.

For the first time in many years—

She felt tired.

Truly tired.

"I do not want anyone to die," she murmured to herself.

Not even the stubborn girl she disliked.

Especially not her.

Meanwhile...

Unbeknownst to her—

Far beyond mortal sight—

The Empress's soul drifted closer to the white light.

And time in the palace was running thin.