

Ghost 227

Chapter 227: between love and memories

There was no pain where she stood.

No cold.

No weight.

No palace.

No responsibilities.

Only light.

Soft.

Warm.

Endless.

The Empress — no, not Empress — simply herself — stood barefoot on what looked like endless white mist. The world around her shimmered gently like dawn through silk curtains.

And ahead—

Two familiar figures.

Her parents.

Not the Duke and Duchess.

But the parents from her past life.

The small restaurant.

The narrow street.

The scent of fried garlic and soy sauce.

The laughter of evening customers.

Her mother's apron.

Her father's tired but proud smile.

They looked exactly as she remembered.

Young.

Alive.

Warm.

Her mother's arms opened.

"Come here."

She ran.

Without thinking.

Without hesitation.

She buried her face into her mother's shoulder.

The scent was real.

The warmth was real.

She had forgotten how much she missed it.

Her father's hand rested on her head.

"You've worked hard."

Her chest tightened.

She hadn't realized how tired she was until that moment.

Tears fell freely.

"I missed you," she whispered.

Her mother cupped her face.

"We know."

"We've been watching."

The white light around them pulsed softly.

Peace wrapped around her like a blanket.

No politics.

No schemes.

No accusations.

No proving herself.

No court.

No loneliness.

Her father smiled gently.

"You don't have to fight anymore."

Her breathing steadied.

That sounded... tempting.

Her mother asked softly,

"Were you happy there?"

She blinked.

There?

The palace.

The lake.

The cold corridors.

The embroidery.

The constant eyes watching her.

She hesitated.

Her parents exchanged a glance.

"Did you have someone there?" her mother asked gently.

Someone.

Her mind flickered.

Princess Zhi crying over food she cooked.

Her three ghost friends arguing loudly.

Her friend from the restaurant shouting at the Emperor.

Her younger sister hugging her.

Her cousin laughing proudly.

And then—

Him.

The Emperor.

His annoyed expression the first time she challenged him.

The dumpling stall.

The scarf.

The way he leaned closer to remove a leaf from her hair.

The night he smiled watching her cook.

Her heart tightened faintly.

But immediately—

Another memory surfaced.

The Dowager throwing a teacup.

Sharp words cutting deeper than glass.

"Even children do better."

The Emperor's cold voice once upon a time.

The night he grabbed her collar in anger during their early marriage.

The suffocating loneliness when she first entered the palace.

The humiliation.

The need to constantly prove herself.

Her throat tightened.

"I was alone," she whispered.

Her mother's expression softened.

Her father asked gently,

"Did anyone protect you?"

She hesitated again.

The white light shimmered.

She remembered the lake.

That night.

The emptiness.

The puppet-like pull.

The helplessness.

Then darkness.

Then here.

Her mother brushed her hair back.

"You don't have to go back."

The words were soft.

Loving.

Not forceful.

"You've suffered enough."

Her father nodded.

"You deserve peace."

Peace.

The word echoed warmly.

Here—

There was no judgment.

No expectations.

No power struggles.

Just family.

Her family.

Her restaurant.

The life she had lost once.

She felt light.

Almost floating.

Her mother took her hand.

"Come further."

Ahead, the white light grew brighter.

Warmer.

Inviting.

She took a step.

Then another.

Her chest felt lighter with each movement.

Behind her—

Very faintly—

A whisper echoed.

"Lian An..."

She paused.

The voice was distant.

Broken.

Almost drowned by the white glow.

Her mother squeezed her hand gently.

"Don't look back."

Another whisper.

"Wake up."

It sounded... desperate.

Her father's expression grew serious.

"Who is that?"

She swallowed.

She knew that voice.

Even before she admitted it.

The Emperor.

Another memory surfaced—

His forehead resting against her hand.

"I love you."

Her heart trembled.

Her mind argued immediately.

Too late.

Where was that love when she needed it?

Where was that understanding when she was humiliated?

Where was that warmth when she felt alone?

She took another step toward the light.

But her chest tightened.

Images flashed rapidly.

Princess Zhi chanting.

Her younger sister crying.

Her cousin shouting in anger.

Her ghost friends crying loudly.

The General saying he would rather disappear than watch her go.

Fen Yu yelling at her not to leave.

The Scholar whispering desperately.

The white light flickered slightly.

Her mother's grip tightened.

"They will move on."

Her father's voice was calm.

"The living always do."

"Your pain there was heavy."

"Your burden was not small."

Her eyes filled with tears.

She had tried so hard.

Tried to survive.

Tried to prove cooking was art.

Tried to protect Princess Zhi.

Tried to understand the Emperor.

Tried to fight unseen darkness.

And still—

She almost drowned alone.

Her voice trembled.

"They didn't see me."

Her mother smiled gently.

"We see you."

The warmth of that sentence nearly broke her resolve.

Then—

Another flash.

The Emperor holding her hand.

Threatening the healer.

Crying openly.

"I will fix everything."

Her heart shook violently.

She turned slightly.

The white light dimmed a fraction.

Behind her—

Far away—

A faint thread shimmered.

Thin.

Fragile.

But still connected.

Her father noticed.

"You still care."

She didn't answer.

Her mother asked softly,

"Do you love someone there?"

Her breath caught.

Love?

She had been too busy surviving to think of it clearly.

But when she imagined never seeing him again—

Her chest hurt.

When she imagined him smiling at someone else—

It hurt.

When she imagined Princess Zhi alone—

It hurt.

When she imagined her ghost friends fading—

It hurt.

Tears streamed down her face.

Her parents looked at her quietly.

"You don't belong fully here yet," her father said softly.

The light flickered again.

The thread behind her trembled.

Her mother brushed her tears away.

"Peace is here."

"But purpose may still be there."

The white glow pulsed brighter.

The voices from behind grew slightly louder.

"Come back."

"Don't leave."

Her heart pounded.

Two worlds pulling at her.

One offering peace.

One demanding courage.

She whispered softly,

"They hurt me."

Her mother nodded.

"Yes."

Her father added gently,

"But did you grow there?"

She thought of her strength.

Her cultivation.

Her friends.

Her defiance.

Her laughter in the night market.

Her scarf.

Her kitchen.

Her fire.

Her eyes opened slowly.

The white light was beautiful.

But it was still.

Too still.

And she—

She had never been someone who chose stillness for long.

Her mother's hand loosened.

Her father stepped back slightly.

"You can come back anytime."

Her chest trembled.

"But if you leave now," her mother added softly, "you must fight."

Her father's voice deepened.

"And finish what you started."

The white light began to pulse faster.

The thread behind her glowed faintly.

The voices from the other side cried louder.

"Lian An!"

Her heart surged.

And for the first time—

She stepped backward.

Away from the white light.

The white light pulsed softly behind her.

Warm.

Gentle.

Calling her to rest.

But she had stopped walking toward it.

Because memories had begun to surface.

Not pain first.

Not humiliation.

But laughter.

The scarf.

She saw it clearly now.

Her uneven red-and-black scarf lying folded awkwardly in her hands.

She remembered how nervous she had been.

How everyone mocked it.

How even she doubted it.

And then—

She remembered walking back into the festival grounds and hearing it was sold.

She remembered the shock in her chest.

The disbelief.

The confusion.

And then the revelation—

He had bought it.

The Emperor.

Wearing it proudly in the wind.

Smiling slightly to himself.

Saying it was his right.

Because she was his wife.

Her chest tightened in the white void.

That warmth had been real.

She felt it again now.

The way her heart had fluttered that day.

The way her ghost friends gasped in disbelief.

The way she had tried not to smile too widely.

She whispered softly into the white space,

"He looked... happy."

The light flickered.

Another memory rose.

The night market.

Her stomach rumbling embarrassingly.

Him pretending he was hungry so she wouldn't feel shy.

Running from the dumpling stall because he forgot money.

His laughter echoing in the dark street.

The way he helped her onto the horse.

His hand at her waist.

The warmth she tried so hard to ignore.

She pressed her hand to her chest now.

That warmth had not been fake.

It had not been political.

It had been real.

Another image.

Princess Zhi sitting under sunlight, smiling softly while eating food she cooked.

Princess Zhi hugging her tightly when she recovered from the plague.

Princess Zhi crying and telling her she was the only one who cared without wanting anything in return.

Her heart trembled harder.

"She needs me."

The white light dimmed slightly.

Then—

The restaurant.

The sizzling sound of oil.

The clatter of chopsticks.

Her friend shouting orders loudly.

The twins laughing while serving customers.

The new man proudly managing the books.

The training hall filled with laborers improving day by day.

The smell of dumplings steaming.

The pride in her chest watching her own creation grow.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"That was mine."

Not inherited.

Not forced.

Built.

From nothing.

Then—

Her ghost friends.

Fen Yu screaming when bullied.

The General pretending to be strong but secretly caring.

The Scholar lecturing endlessly.

Their bickering.

Their laughter.

Their presence hovering beside her when she felt alone.

Her voice cracked.

"They stayed."

Even when they had no reason to.

Even when she scolded them.

They stayed.

And now—

They were crying.

She could feel it faintly.

Like distant ripples reaching her.

The white light tried to soothe her again.

"You've suffered."

Her mother's voice echoed gently.

"You deserve peace."

She closed her eyes.

Yes.

She had suffered.

The Dowager's cold prejudice.

The sharp punishments.

The humiliations.

The early days of marriage where she was treated like an obligation.

The Emperor's anger once upon a time.

The loneliness of palace corridors.

The feeling of being invisible.

She whispered weakly,

"They hurt me."

The white light glowed warmer.

"They didn't protect me."

Silence.

Then another memory broke through.

The Emperor lifting the healer by his collar in rage.

"If anything happens to her—"

His trembling voice confessing love.

His hand holding hers as if afraid she would disappear.

His eyes red from sleepless nights.

The way he refused to leave her side.

Her breath hitched.

That was not indifference.

That was not duty.

That was fear.

Raw, unmasked fear.

And then—

Her cousin threatening to kill the Emperor if she died.

Her younger sister crying uncontrollably.

Her Duchess mother praying until her lips cracked.

Her father standing like a pillar despite trembling hands.

They were waiting.

All of them.

Waiting for her.

The white light pulsed faster.

It was no longer fully welcoming.

It was testing.

Her mother's voice grew softer.

"Do you still belong there?"

She swallowed.

Her answer came without hesitation this time.

"Yes."

The word shocked even her.

Yes.

She did belong there.

Not as a victim.

Not as a puppet.

But as someone who had built something.

Someone who had changed things.

Someone who had grown.

Her chest surged painfully.

"I haven't finished."

The thread behind her glowed brighter.

The voices calling her grew clearer.

"Come back."

"Lian An."

"Please."

Tears streamed down her face.

She looked at her parents.

"I can't leave them."

Her mother smiled gently.

"We knew."

Her father nodded slowly.

"You always were stubborn."

She laughed through tears.

"You raised me."

The white light began to recede.

Not angrily.

Not disappointed.

Simply accepting.

Her mother touched her cheek.

"If you go back... it will hurt again."

Her father's voice deepened.

"You will fight again."

She nodded firmly.

"I will."

The thread behind her pulled harder now.

Her body somewhere far away calling her back.

Her ghost friends crying.

Her Emperor whispering promises.

Princess Zhi praying desperately.

She took a step backward.

Away from peace.

Toward pain.

But also toward love.

Toward unfinished purpose.

"I'm not done," she whispered.

The white light flared once—

Bright enough to blind.

Then it softened.

Her parents began to fade.

"We'll be waiting," her mother said gently.

Her father added,

"Live well this time."

Her chest shattered with emotion.

"I will."

The thread snapped tight.

And she fell backward—

Through darkness.

Through cold.

Through distance.

Toward breath.