

## **Ghost 228**

Chapter 228: the breath that broke palace

The white light was so close now.

So close she could almost feel its warmth wrapping around her again.

Her parents stood ahead of her, clearer than before.

Their figures no longer distant silhouettes — but vivid, loving, waiting.

"Come," her mother said softly, holding out her hand.

Her father smiled gently.

"You don't have to suffer anymore."

She stepped forward instinctively.

The warmth tugged at her chest.

The exhaustion she had been carrying for months, for years, felt like it could finally dissolve.

The palace.

The schemes.

The loneliness.

The pain.

All of it could disappear.

She could rest.

Her mother's fingers brushed against hers.

Just a little more.

Just one more step.

Then—

A voice.

Broken.

Desperate.

"Lian An... wake up."

The warmth flickered.

Her mother's smile faltered slightly.

Another whisper.

"I love you."

Her heart clenched violently.

That voice.

Not memory.

Not imagination.

Real.

Calling her.

Through worlds.

Her father's eyes grew serious.

"You are still tied there."

Her chest trembled.

She could feel it now — the thread at her back.

Pulling.

Tightening.

Refusing to snap.

Another voice layered over the first.

Princess Zhi's quiet chanting.

Her cousin's furious vow.

Her younger sister crying.

Fen Yu screaming angrily.

The General growling in frustration.

The Scholar chanting desperately.

The white light dimmed slightly.

Her mother squeezed her hand gently.

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

Her father added softly,

"You will bleed again."

She swallowed.

"I know."

"Then why?" her mother asked.

Tears spilled down her face.

"Because this time... I'm not alone."

The white light trembled.

Her parents' expressions softened.

Her father nodded slowly.

"You've grown."

Her mother stepped back.

"You must choose."

Behind her, the thread flared bright — painfully bright.

Ahead, peace waited.

Behind, love waited.

And she understood something clearly now.

Peace without purpose would hollow her.

Love, even painful, would strengthen her.

She closed her eyes.

"I can't come with you. Not yet."

The white light pulsed once — bright and blinding.

Her mother smiled sadly.

"We will always be here."

Her father's voice carried strength.

"Live fiercely."

The warmth faded.

The thread snapped tight.

And she fell.

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In the Palace

The Empress's body lay fragile beneath layers of wool and silk.

Her breathing had become almost imperceptible.

The healer's fingers pressed against her wrist.

He felt it.

The pulse thinning.

Slipping.

He inhaled sharply.

His voice trembled.

"Your Majesty..."

The Emperor did not look up.

He sat on the edge of the bed, holding her hand between both of his.

"Not yet," he whispered.

The healer swallowed.

"She is... reaching the end."

The Duchess collapsed into tears.

Princess Zhi's chanting faltered.

The Duke's shoulders shook for the first time.

The Emperor leaned closer.

"Lian An."

His voice cracked.

"Don't do this."

Her breathing stopped.

One second.

Two.

Three.

The healer leaned in.

Listening.

Nothing.

Silence filled the chamber.

Heavy.

Absolute.

The Duchess screamed softly.

Princess Zhi covered her mouth.

The Duke closed his eyes.

The healer's voice trembled.

"Her Majesty... has—"

He couldn't finish.

Outside, a maid heard the cry and gasped.

Another servant whispered urgently.

Within moments—

The whisper began to spread.

"The Empress is dead."

Across corridors.

Through courtyards.

From servant to servant.

From guard to maid.

Like wind through dry leaves.

The Empress is dead.

The Emperor did not move.

He stared at her face.

Pale.

Still.

Too still.

He shook her gently.

"Lian An."

No response.

His voice grew desperate.

"You said you would fight."

Tears fell freely now.

"Don't leave me."

His forehead pressed against her hand.

The healer stepped back.

Helpless.

The Duke sank to his knees.

Princess Zhi sobbed openly.

The chamber felt suffocating.

Outside—

The whisper grew louder.

"Her Majesty jumped into the lake."

"They say she couldn't bear it."

"They say she felt unloved."

"They say the Emperor loved Lady Chen."

The rumor twisted.

Spread.

Deepened.

In Lady Chen's courtyard—

A maid rushed in, breathless.

"Your Majesty... the Empress..."

Lady Chen looked up.

"What about her?"

"She... she has passed."

Silence.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Then Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

Her lips trembled slightly.

But not with grief.

With relief.

She exhaled slowly.

"It is fate."

Her maid nodded hesitantly.

Outside, servants whispered mournfully.

In the Dowager's chamber—

The news reached her.

The teacup in her hand fell.

It shattered against the floor.

"No."

Her voice was hoarse.

"She was strong."

But the palace already believed it.

The Empress is dead.

In her chamber—

The Emperor still held her hand.

Refusing to release it.

"Wake up," he whispered again.

His voice softer now.

Broken.

Empty.

The healer closed his eyes.

The Duchess wailed quietly.

Princess Zhi clung to the bedframe.

The Duke's tears fell silently.

And somewhere unseen—

Three ghosts screamed in agony.

Because they felt it too.

The thread—

Gone.

For a single terrifying moment—

Gone.

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But far beyond mortal sight—

In the space between death and return—

A falling soul accelerated.

Toward breath.

Toward pain.

Toward unfinished love.

The palace believed she was gone.

The rumor had already taken root.

But fate had not finished writing her story.

The Dowager stood still for a long moment after hearing the words.

The Empress has passed.

The sentence did not feel real.

It felt like something whispered by cruel wind.

Her fingers trembled slightly against the carved armrest of her chair.

For years, she had trained herself not to be moved easily.

She had ruled the inner palace with iron dignity.

She had judged without hesitation.

Punished without regret.

But this—

This was not what she had imagined.

She did not like the Empress.

She had never hidden that.

She thought her unrefined.

Too outspoken.

Too modern in thinking.

Too bold in challenging traditions.

But she never wished for her death.

And certainly not like this.

Not drowning in despair.

Not whispered about as a woman unloved.

The Dowager slowly stood.

Her chief maid rushed to support her, but she lifted a hand.

"No."

Her voice was hoarse.

"Summon the palace officials."

Within moments, inner palace stewards, head eunuchs, and senior maids gathered in the courtyard.

They knelt.

Silence heavy.

The Dowager's gaze swept across them.

Her eyes were red.

But not from weakness.

From shock.

"In accordance with palace protocol," she began slowly, "the Empress has departed."

A collective intake of breath echoed.

Some maids lowered their heads, tears falling quietly.

Even those who feared her authority could not deny—

The Empress had been kind.

She had cooked with her own hands.

She had spoken gently to servants.

She had defended Princess Zhi.

She had smiled often.

The Dowager inhaled sharply.

"Hang white mourning banners across all main corridors."

Her voice grew firmer.

"Lower the palace flags."

"Prepare the ceremonial hall."

"Send word to the ancestral temple."

She paused.

Her throat tightened.

"For three days, the palace will observe mourning."

The stewards bowed deeply.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Dowager added quietly,

"No music."

"No festivities."

"All court gatherings postponed."

She closed her eyes briefly.

"She was... still young."

That was the closest she would come to admitting regret aloud.

The stewards dispersed immediately.

Within the hour—

White cloth replaced red silk.

Lanterns were dimmed.

Bright curtains removed.

The palace transformed.

What had been vibrant now turned pale.

Heavy.

Silent.

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The Whispering Corridors

Servants moved quietly, tying white ribbons to pillars.

Some cried openly.

Some whispered softly.

"She always thanked us."

"She never scolded without reason."

"She cooked for everyone..."

A kitchen maid wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"I've never seen a noble lady cook like that."

A guard muttered quietly,

"They say she was lonely."

Another replied,

"They say she loved His Majesty."

Rumors twisted and spread.

But grief overshadowed speculation.

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In Lady Chen's Chamber

Lady Chen stood by her window.

Watching white banners being hung.

Her expression was controlled.

Measured.

But inside—

Her thoughts were not calm.

She had expected relief.

Instead—

There was unease.

The palace was not celebrating.

It was mourning deeply.

The Emperor had not left the Empress's chamber.

He had not come to her.

Not even once.

She whispered softly to herself,

"He will need time."

She pressed her hands together.

"I will be patient."

But something inside her felt unsettled.

Because grief—

If deep enough—

Could turn into obsession.

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Shin Gu's Silence

Shin Gu stood in her courtyard, observing servants carry white silk.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

She felt it.

A disturbance.

The energy she had woven carefully into the palace array had shifted.

The Empress's thread had snapped briefly.

But not fully dissolved.

Something tugged at it.

Subtly.

Resisting finality.

Shin Gu's lips pressed thin.

"That is not possible," she murmured.

Yet the air did not feel settled.

It felt... suspended.

Like a storm waiting to break.

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Princess Zhi's Grief

Princess Zhi refused to leave the Empress's side.

She clutched her cold hand.

Her tears had dried from crying too much.

Her voice was hoarse.

"You promised..."

She whispered.

"You promised we would grow strong together."

Her shoulders shook.

"You said you wouldn't leave me."

She pressed her forehead against the blanket.

The white mourning cloth outside fluttered gently in the wind.

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The Duke's Silence

The Duke stood upright despite devastation.

He did not wail.

He did not shout.

But his silence was terrifying.

His jaw was clenched so tightly a vein pulsed visibly.

He looked at the Emperor once.

Long.

Cold.

If she was truly gone—

He would never forgive.

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The Emperor in White

The Emperor remained seated beside her bed.

He had not changed clothes.

He had not eaten.

He had not slept.

When a eunuch entered to inform him that mourning banners were hung—

He did not respond.

He only continued staring at her face.

White cloth had been draped gently around the bed.

The lantern light flickered softly.

"She hated when I looked sad," he murmured faintly.

His fingers brushed her knuckles.

"They think you're gone."

His voice dropped.

"I don't accept it."

He closed his eyes.

"I won't."

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The Palace Under Mourning

By evening—

The entire palace was transformed.

White banners hung from every corridor.

Silk fluttered from balconies.

Temple bells rang slowly.

Deep.

Echoing.

The sound carried across the kingdom.

And with it—

The rumor hardened into belief.

The Empress has died.

Commoners in the capital lowered their heads.

Some wept sincerely.

"She opened restaurants."

"She trained laborers."

"She was kind."

Even those who had never met her felt the loss.

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The Dowager's Private Reflection

In her chamber that night—

The Dowager dismissed her attendants.

She sat alone.

Staring at a flickering candle.

"She was stubborn," she murmured.

"She challenged me."

She exhaled slowly.

"But she was not weak."

Her throat tightened.

"I misjudged her."

The words hung heavy in the empty room.

Outside—

Wind rustled the mourning banners.

Inside—

The Dowager closed her eyes.

"If you return..."

She whispered softly.

"I will not treat you the same."

But no one heard her.

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The Air Before a Miracle

As night deepened—

The palace fell into heavy silence.

Lanterns dim.

Guards quiet.

Servants exhausted from crying.

The Emperor still holding her hand.

Princess Zhi still kneeling.

The Duke standing like stone.

White silk fluttering in moonlight.

And somewhere unseen—

Three ghosts hovered near the ceiling.

Weeping.

Because for one unbearable moment—

They had felt the thread break.

But now—

Very faintly—

They felt something else.

A flicker.

Tiny.

Almost imperceptible.

Fen Yu gasped softly.

"Wait."

The General froze.

The Scholar closed his eyes.

The thread—

It trembled.

Not dead.

Not gone.

Only waiting.