

Ghost 53

Chapter 53: breathe of hope

The morning light crept slowly across the carved beams of the Duke's residence, turning the pale mist to a golden shimmer. Inside the inner chamber, the air was thick with the scent of herbs, candle wax, and unspoken prayers.

Lian An sat beside the bed, her eyes red from the night's vigil. Her mother, Duchess Xiu, held prayer beads tightly between her fingers, lips moving in a constant murmur to the heavens. Beside her, Lian Hua dozed lightly, her head resting against her sister's shoulder, exhaustion making her breaths uneven.

The Duke had not yet stirred. His bandaged chest rose and fell faintly, but the stillness of his face frightened them all.

The chamber doors creaked open. A palace eunuch entered first, bowing deeply. "By His Majesty's command, the Imperial Physician has arrived to tend to the Duke."

Lian An rose at once, straightening her robe and forcing calm into her voice. "Please—let him through."

The Imperial Physician was an older man with long white brows and hands that moved with precise calm. He bowed briefly to the Duchess.

"I come by the Emperor's order," he said. "His Majesty was greatly concerned for the Duke's health and sent me to ensure he recovers swiftly."

Duchess Xiu clasped her hands, tears gathering again. "Heaven bless His Majesty for his kindness. Please, sir, do whatever must be done. He has not opened his eyes since last night."

The physician nodded once, setting his medicine box on the table. His eyes were sharp as he examined the Duke's wounds—cleanly bandaged, still bleeding faintly beneath. He pressed two fingers to the Duke's wrist and frowned slightly, listening to the pulse that thudded weakly beneath the skin.

Then he spoke softly to his assistant. "Prepare the needles."

The chamber grew silent except for the faint clink of metal. Lian An stood at the Duke's side, her hand resting on the blanket near his. Her mother's prayer beads moved faster now, the soft sound of clicking wood marking each anxious heartbeat.

The physician inserted the first needle near the shoulder wound, then another at the wrist, then the chest. Each one seemed to draw a faint stir of color back to the Duke's face.

The physician worked in silence, his concentration absolute. Finally, he withdrew the last needle and dabbed a bit of medicine onto the wound.

For a long moment, no one breathed.

Then the physician sat back and exhaled slowly. "The worst has passed," he said at last. "His pulse has steadied. The poison on the arrowhead has been drawn out by the earlier treatment. He will wake within three to five hours."

The room erupted in quiet sobs. Duchess Xiu pressed both hands to her mouth, her shoulders shaking. "Thank Heaven..." she whispered, the prayer beads slipping from her fingers and scattering across the floor. "Thank Heaven, he's safe."

Lian Hua burst into tears, clutching her sister's sleeve. "He's going to wake up, Sister! He's really going to wake up!"

Lian An let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. She turned to the physician, bowing low. "Thank you. Please, rest and have tea before you return to the palace. We owe you more than words can repay."

The old man smiled faintly. "No thanks are needed, Your Majesty. It is the Emperor's grace that sent me. You must continue to keep the room warm and quiet. He will wake soon, but his body will be weak."

Duchess Xiu clasped the physician's hands gratefully. "When he wakes, I'll thank His Majesty myself," she said, her voice breaking.

After the physician left, the chamber returned to quiet. Only the soft rhythm of the Duke's breathing filled the space.

Lian An sat again beside her father, brushing a damp strand of hair from his forehead. "You can rest a little longer," she whispered. "But when you wake... you'll have to hear how brave everyone's been."

Her mother managed a tired smile through her tears. "You've been the bravest of us all, An."

Lian Hua leaned her head against her sister's shoulder again, whispering, "He'll scold us when he wakes. He always does."

Lian An smiled faintly. "Then we'll let him. It'll mean he's truly back."

The sun climbed higher outside, light pooling softly over the Duke's pale face. His fingers twitched once—barely perceptible, but enough for hope to bloom in the women's eyes.

In the stillness that followed, the sound of prayer beads rolling across the floor seemed almost like music—each soft clink a heartbeat closer to his awakening.