

Ghost 86

Chapter 86: the handsome emperor of east

The palace bells chimed across the courtyards, long and clear, echoing through the crisp air. Servants hurried about like waves of blue and gold, preparing the final details for the grand reception. Silk banners fluttered above the gates; the fragrance of burning incense floated gently through the morning light.

Inside her chamber, Empress Lian An stood before the mirror, fully dressed.

The faint shimmer of her blue gown caught every thread of sunlight that slipped through the window. The robe was embroidered with silver peonies, soft as mist, and it wrapped her in quiet elegance — light, graceful, yet dignified enough to match the moment. Her long black hair flowed down her back, pinned with a single jade comb.

She looked beautiful — breathtaking, even — though she herself didn't think so.

Her maid Yun'er stepped back, adjusting the sleeve one last time. "Your Majesty looks radiant today. No one would guess you've been unwell."

Lian An smiled faintly, her expression cool and distant. "Radiant or not, I'd rather be in bed."

Fen Yu appeared near the mirror, admiring the reflection. "You look divine! If I still had a heart, it would be fluttering."

Wei Rong nodded, pretending to straighten an invisible collar. "If the Emperor sees you like this, he might finally understand why people write poems about women."

Lian An rolled her eyes. "If he sees me, he'll probably lecture me about walking too slowly."

Yun'er gave a nervous smile. "Your Majesty, His Majesty is waiting outside the hall."

Lian An's shoulders stiffened slightly. "Of course he is," she muttered, grabbing her handkerchief. "The man always appears when I least want him to."

The Emperor Awestruck

Outside the chamber, Emperor Rong Zhen stood surrounded by his attendants. The light breeze lifted his robe slightly, making the red silk shimmer like flame. He was patient — outwardly calm, as always — but his eyes kept flicking toward the door.

When it opened, time itself seemed to pause.

Lian An stepped out slowly, each movement controlled but elegant, the blue of her gown glowing softly under the sunlight. Her face was serene, her long lashes casting shadows on her cheeks.

For a heartbeat, the Emperor forgot to breathe.

She had always been beautiful — the whole empire said so — but today, something about her presence was different. The calm after the storm had only sharpened her grace. The contrast of blue silk against her pale skin made her look almost ethereal.

He found himself staring longer than he meant to.

She noticed, of course. Her gaze flicked toward him briefly, expression unreadable, then she simply turned her head away as if he were part of the furniture.

The spell broke.

He cleared his throat. "Are you... doing well now? Feeling better?"

Lian An's lips curved slightly — not into a smile, but into that familiar half-annoyed, half-bored expression he'd seen so often. She didn't bother to answer. She simply made a face that clearly said "you're asking too late", adjusted her sleeve, and began walking forward.

He blinked, caught between irritation and amusement, then followed.

As they walked down the marble steps toward the courtyard, he noticed the subtle stiffness in her stride — the faint limp, the way her hands trembled slightly when she steadied herself.

She was still hurting.

A flicker of guilt brushed his chest, but she never gave him the chance to speak. She held her head high, ignoring his presence completely.

When they reached the waiting carriage, he extended his hand automatically. "Careful," he said, his voice softer than he intended.

She glanced at his hand — then deliberately turned to take Yun'er's hand instead.

Without a word, she stepped past him, lifting her robe just enough to avoid tripping, and climbed into the carriage by herself.

The Emperor's fingers froze mid-air for a second before he quietly withdrew them. The servants pretended not to notice.

He followed her inside. The space between them was filled with silence — thick, uncomfortable silence.

The Carriage Ride

The wheels creaked softly as the carriage rolled through the palace gates.

Inside, Lian An sat by the window, gazing out at the fluttering banners and the bustling soldiers standing at attention. The rhythmic clatter of hooves filled the air.

Neither spoke.

She had nothing to say to him, and he... didn't know what to say anymore. Every time he opened his mouth, the words felt wrong.

At one point, he caught himself glancing at her reflection in the glass — the curve of her cheek, the light brushing against her hair — and looked away quickly, as if caught doing something forbidden.

Lian An noticed but said nothing. Her lips twitched in quiet amusement.

By the time the carriage rolled to a stop, both had memorized the silence too well.

The Arrival

When the doors opened, sunlight poured in.

Lian An stepped out first, ignoring the Emperor's offered hand again. She took Yun'er's instead and gracefully jumped down from the carriage. The blue of her gown shimmered like water under the sun.

The Emperor followed, his expression carefully neutral, though his jaw tightened slightly.

Before them stretched the grand Golden Courtyard, decorated with banners bearing both empires' crests. Rows of ministers, nobles, and foreign envoys filled the space, their silk robes a sea of color.

Musicians stood ready with flutes and drums, while soldiers lined the pathway with spears glinting under the light.

The crowd buzzed with excitement.

Lian An looked around — it was truly a sight. The air smelled of incense and blooming orchids, the laughter of nobles mingling with the low hum of anticipation.

But then a murmur spread through the gathered crowd. Heads turned toward the massive golden carriage approaching from the far end of the courtyard.

"That must be them," one noble whispered.

"The royal family of the Eastern Kingdom!" said another.

The drums rolled, announcing the arrival.

The carriage stopped, and the door opened slowly.

A man stepped out.

And the entire courtyard fell silent.

He was... breathtaking.

Tall, dressed in white and silver, with sharp, noble features that looked as though they'd been carved by divine hands. His eyes were calm but piercing, and his smile — faint, polite, and effortless — was enough to send a ripple of shock through every woman present.

Even the air seemed to pause around him.

Lian An's mouth fell open slightly.

For once in her life, she was speechless.

Her ghost companions (invisible to everyone but her) floated near, whispering excitedly.

Fen Yu gasped. "By the heavens... he's gorgeous!"

Wei Rong grinned. "I told you the rumors were true!"

Li Shen added solemnly, "His bone structure could inspire an entire dynasty of painters."

Lian An didn't hear them — or maybe she did — but she couldn't tear her eyes away.

The Emperor, standing beside her, noticed immediately.

He turned his head slightly and saw her expression — wide-eyed, mouth open, completely lost in shock.

His brows twitched. A flicker of jealousy, irritation, or maybe amusement crossed his face before he leaned closer and murmured under his breath:

"Close your mouth, Lian An. The flies will get in."

Her head snapped toward him instantly, cheeks flushing bright red. She glared at him, then quickly pressed her lips together.

The Emperor smirked slightly, satisfied.

Lian An turned away, pretending to fix her sleeve — but her ears were still burning.

The ghost Fen Yu burst into giggles. "You got caught staring!"

Lian An whispered under her breath, "Be quiet or I'll exorcise you."

The ghost only laughed harder.

Meanwhile, the visiting Emperor from the Eastern Kingdom walked forward gracefully, greeting the court with a calm smile that sent another wave of whispers through the nobles.

Even Lady Chen, standing among the onlookers, lowered her gaze shyly. Ministers nodded in admiration.

But only one man wasn't smiling — the Emperor of this empire.

He stood beside his wife, jaw clenched just slightly, pretending calm while his thoughts churned.

The Empress, on the other hand, kept her eyes carefully averted now — looking at the flowers, the banners, the sky — anywhere but at the handsome foreign Emperor.

Still, her heart beat faster than usual, though she would never admit it aloud.

And so, under the burning noon sun, the two empires finally stood face to face — one Emperor biting back his irritation, one Empress pretending indifference, and one visiting sovereign whose beauty had thrown the entire court into stunned silence.

But of all the people in that courtyard, only one had her mouth teased shut by her husband's whisper.

And when Lian An stole one last glance toward the foreign Emperor, her own ghosts started giggling again.

"Admit it," Fen Yu sang softly near her ear. "You've got a little crush."

Lian An clenched her fan and muttered under her breath, "I'm going to bury all three of you tonight."

The Emperor beside her shot her a puzzled look, unaware she wasn't talking to him.

And just like that, with one flush of red and one mocking smirk, the great diplomatic ceremony began — under a sky that suddenly felt far too bright.