

Ghost 88

Chapter 88: the weight of cross

The noon sun had softened, but the heat of the courtyard still clung to the air. The banners of both empires fluttered lazily, and the scent of incense mixed with sweat and steel. The ceremony of swords had ended — peace was sealed, the alliance forged. Applause and ritual bows gave way to murmurs and movement as the guests prepared to leave for the banquet.

But at the center of it all stood Empress Lian An, her poise unbroken, her back straight — though every muscle beneath her robe trembled from the strain.

She had been standing since dawn, bowing, greeting, smiling through the ache that gnawed at her knees. The last three days of kneeling punishment had left her legs weak and swollen, the wounds barely healed. Every step felt like a dagger twisting in her bones.

Now, as the crowd shifted, she felt the dizziness creep up her spine. The edges of her vision blurred slightly, her breath came shorter. She clenched her fan tighter, refusing to show weakness in front of anyone — especially him.

From the corner of his eye, Emperor Rong Zhen had been watching.

She stood beside him, composed but pale, her hands trembling just slightly beneath the wide sleeve of her robe. For all her stubbornness, he could see it — the faint quiver of her knees, the way her lips pressed together to hide the pain.

He had seen her endure far worse, but this was different. It wasn't pride keeping her upright — it was habit. A quiet, lonely defiance that somehow made his chest ache.

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then, quietly, he exhaled, turned toward the foreign Emperor, and murmured an excuse.

"Please forgive me. My wife has been unwell. I must see to her for a moment."

The visiting Emperor inclined his head graciously. "Of course. Her Majesty has been standing longer than anyone here."

With that, Rong Zhen stepped forward.

The courtiers straightened. The movement drew every pair of eyes — even those of the Dowager Empress and Lady Chen, who sat a few steps away, both pretending not to watch though curiosity gleamed in their eyes.

He reached her side, lowering his voice so only she could hear. "You've stood long enough," he said quietly.

She blinked at him, unsure what he meant — and then he took her hand.

Warm. Firm. Unexpected.

Her first instinct was shock; her second, panic.

His hand, rougher from sword training, wrapped around her slender fingers. The contact sent a jolt through her chest. She froze completely.

The crowd gasped softly — murmurs rippled through the officials. No one had ever seen the Emperor touch his wife in public before.

She turned toward him slightly, lips parting, unsure whether to pull away or lean forward. He was close now, his expression unreadable — calm, as always, but something unfamiliar flickered behind his eyes.

Her heart raced, the memories she didn't own flashing like fragments of a dream.

The night she first woke up in this body — this Empress's body. The choking hands of the man before her. The dying breath of the old soul whose last memory was terror. The way she had vowed, then and there, to never let him close again.

And yet here he was — the same man, his hand steady, his voice low but gentle.

She hesitated, her mind caught between fear and relief. What is he doing?

Her body swayed slightly. The ache in her legs was too much. Just as she was about to stumble, his other arm came up — strong and sure — and caught her by the waist.

"Easy," he murmured, his tone quiet enough that no one else could hear. "You'll fall."

She stiffened, her hands rising instinctively toward his chest to steady herself — then froze halfway, realizing what she was about to do. The old memories flooded back — the warning she carried from that other soul, the one who once reached for him and met death instead.

Don't touch him, that voice whispered in her memory. He hates it.

Her hand trembled midair, ready to retreat, when his voice stopped her.

"Put your hand here," he said softly, his breath brushing her temple.

She blinked. "What?"

He tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable but oddly patient. "On my shoulder... and your head here." His tone was firm but calm, as if giving an order that brooked no refusal. "I can't see where you're stepping if you're about to collapse in front of everyone."

It took her a second to understand. He wasn't mocking her. He was offering... support.

She hesitated, confusion flickering through her eyes, but then slowly obeyed.

Her hand rested against the firm line of his shoulder, and when her balance tilted, he guided her head gently to his chest. The motion was surprisingly natural — not forced, not awkward.

Her forehead brushed against the soft fabric of his robe, and she caught the faint scent of him — warm, clean, with the faint spice of cedarwood and the crispness of winter air. It wasn't overwhelming, but it lingered, subtle and intoxicating.

Her heart skipped a beat.

His chest rose and fell steadily beneath her cheek — strong, calm, grounding.

She had never been this close before. Not since she had entered this world.

The old Lian An had known this man as a cruel stranger; this one felt his pulse beneath her fingers.

Her thoughts scattered completely. Why does he smell this good? Why does his chest feel... so—

She stopped herself, mortified.

He was the Emperor. Her husband. The man who'd once killed her predecessor. And yet in that moment, with his arm around her, the memory blurred with the present.

He looked down at her, his jaw tightening slightly, not from anger but something else — something softer, almost protective.

Behind them, a few whispers ran through the gathered nobles. The Dowager Empress and Lady Chen exchanged glances from their canopy.

Lady Chen leaned toward the elder woman and whispered lightly, "His Majesty seems quite... attentive today."

The Dowager's thin lips curved. "He's simply saving face," she said smoothly. "After that foreign Emperor nearly kissed his wife's hand, he has to remind everyone she belongs to him."

Lady Chen chuckled softly, covering her mouth with her sleeve. "Still, he's never shown such warmth before. Perhaps jealousy has its uses."

The Dowager's eyes glimmered with quiet satisfaction. "Let him be. The court will talk — and that will serve its purpose."

Meanwhile, Rong Zhen pretended not to hear the murmurs.

He looked down at the woman in his arms. She was so light. Too light. Her wrist felt frail beneath his hand. Her skin, even through the layers of silk, was cool — almost fragile.

No wonder she was always sickly. No wonder she had fainted that night.

He realized, with a faint pang, that he had never once considered how much she endured — standing for hours, kneeling in punishment, eating barely enough to survive. He had seen her beauty every day, but not the pain beneath it.

She weighs almost nothing, he thought, frowning. How did she even stand this long?

For the first time in years, a strange ache bloomed in his chest — not irritation, not anger. Something closer to regret.

But he didn't speak. He simply tightened his hold slightly, steady enough that she wouldn't fall.

Lian An, still resting against him, felt the shift in his grip — firm but careful. The warmth of his hand seeped through the layers of her gown, spreading across her back like quiet reassurance.

Her ghosts, hovering nearby and invisible to everyone else, whispered furiously.

Fen Yu squeaked, "He's holding you! In public! Like an actual husband!"

Wei Rong sighed dramatically. "Ah, the power of jealousy. Better than any love potion."

Li Shen nodded sagely. "It seems His Majesty has remembered he's married."

Lian An tried to keep a straight face, whispering under her breath, "Be quiet before I exorcise all three of you."

Rong Zhen tilted his head slightly, catching the faint movement of her lips. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," she said quickly.

He studied her face for a moment — her flushed cheeks, the soft tremor of her lashes — and looked away before his expression could betray him.

As the procession finally ended, the courtiers began to disperse. The drums slowed, replaced by the faint chime of wind bells in the courtyard. The foreign Emperor turned once to glance back — his eyes briefly meeting Lian An's again before he smiled politely and turned away.

Rong Zhen's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Instead, he shifted slightly, keeping his hand at her back as he guided her toward the inner hall.

The whispers followed them like shadows.

"His Majesty truly cares for the Empress."

"It's about time..."

"Perhaps the Dowager's plans are working."

Only Lian An heard the ghosts snickering.

"Look at you," Fen Yu teased. "Head on his chest, hand on his shoulder — what a picture of devotion!"

"Quiet," she hissed. "If you keep talking, I'll throw you in the incense burner."

They laughed, but she didn't. Her mind was too full — the warmth of his hold, the faint beat of his heart beneath her ear, and the confusing ache that had nothing to do with her sore knees.

By the time they reached the inner steps of the palace, she finally spoke — her voice low, almost to herself.

"You can let go now, Your Majesty."

He didn't immediately answer. Then, quietly, "Can you walk?"

She hesitated. "I'll manage."

He nodded once, releasing her slowly, his touch lingering only a moment longer than necessary.

When she straightened, he looked away, covering the faint turmoil behind his composed expression.

Lady Chen and the Dowager watched from afar, both wearing faint smiles — though for entirely different reasons.

And as the Empress steadied herself, she thought bitterly: He may be handsome and strong, but he's still the same man who broke this body once. I won't forget that.

Even so... her heart refused to obey. It beat too fast, too unevenly, every time she remembered the warmth of his chest and the scent of cedar lingering in the air.