

Ghost 220

Chapter 220: two courtyard two words

The palace was divided that day.

In one courtyard, laughter was light and sweet.

In another, silence was thick enough to suffocate.

Lady Chen's Courtyard — False Peace

Sunlight filtered gently through carved windows, falling on a low table filled with delicate snacks.

Lotus-seed pastries.

Honeyed plums.

Warm herbal tea.

Lady Chen sat gracefully, her posture elegant, fingers pale against porcelain. Across from her sat Shin Gu, calm and composed, her expression soft, eyes lowered in modest politeness.

Lady Chen lifted her teacup and smiled faintly.

"Thank you... truly," she said softly.

"If it weren't for you, I wouldn't know how to endure these days."

Shin Gu returned a gentle smile.

"It's nothing. Helping friends is only natural."

Her voice was smooth, warm, comforting—like spring water flowing over stone.

Lady Chen's shoulders relaxed.

"These past few days... everything feels heavy. The palace is filled with rumors. The Dowager is tense. His Majesty barely looks at me anymore. And now... the Empress..."

She paused, lowering her gaze.

"Part of me feels guilty for feeling relieved," she admitted quietly.

"But another part of me... is afraid."

Shin Gu's eyes flickered.

"Afraid of what?"

Lady Chen's fingers tightened slightly around her teacup.

"Afraid that even after everything, His Majesty still cares for her. Afraid that if she wakes up... I'll lose my place."

Shin Gu set down her cup.

"You are too kind, Sister Chen," she said gently.

"You've done nothing wrong. The palace is a battlefield. Those who hesitate are the first to be wounded."

Lady Chen looked up.

Shin Gu continued, her voice soft but edged with certainty.

"You stood by His Majesty when he was young. You supported the Dowager. You endured years of loneliness. The palace owes you your position. No one can take that from you."

Lady Chen's eyes shimmered.

"You think so?"

Shin Gu nodded.

"Of course. You deserve happiness."

Lady Chen smiled, relief washing over her features.

Unnoticed by her, Shin Gu's gaze lingered on her face a second longer than necessary.

Then she smiled again.

A smile that never reached her eyes.

Empress's Courtyard — The Edge of Fear

On the other side of the palace, the air was heavy with the scent of medicine.

The Empress lay motionless on the bed.

Her face was pale, lips faintly blue, breath so shallow that it seemed like she might vanish between one heartbeat and the next.

The healer knelt beside the bed, hands trembling as he checked her pulse again.

Too weak.

Still too weak.

He swallowed.

"Your Majesty..." he whispered when the Emperor entered the chamber, his voice shaking.

"Her condition... has not improved at all."

The Emperor stood at the bedside, staring at her.

The woman who argued with him.

Who glared at him.

Who cooked for him.

Who laughed with him in the night market.

Who stood stubbornly against the Dowager.

Now she lay silent.

Fragile.

Like she might disappear if he blinked.

The healer wiped cold sweat from his forehead.

"The wound on her head has been treated. The medicine is being given. But... her spirit seems... trapped. It's as if she doesn't want to wake."

The Emperor's fingers slowly curled into a fist.

"Doesn't want to wake?" His voice was dangerously calm.

"What nonsense are you speaking?"

The healer lowered his head, terrified.

"I—I don't know how else to explain it, Your Majesty. Physically, her body should be recovering. But her pulse... it's fading. As if her soul is drifting away."

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"Then pull her back."

The healer trembled.

"I... I have tried everything within my ability."

The Emperor stepped closer to the bed.

He reached out, hesitated, then placed his hand gently over her cold fingers.

They were colder than he remembered.

His throat tightened.

He remembered her scolding him in the kitchen.

Remembered her pretending to be pregnant, cursing him under her breath.

Remembered her shy smile when he placed the hairpin in her hair.

Remembered her laughter in the night market.

He had never imagined her lying like this.

"Wake up," he said softly.

His voice cracked despite himself.

"Didn't you say you hate me? Then wake up and scold me again."

No response.

The Emperor closed his eyes for a moment.

Regret surged through him like a blade.

Why did I not tell her sooner?

Why did I let her walk alone?

Why did I believe she was strong enough to bear everything?

The healer dared to speak again.

"Your Majesty... her condition is unstable. If she does not wake by dawn... I fear..."

The Emperor turned sharply.

"If she doesn't wake by dawn," he said coldly,

"you won't need to fear anything. You'll be dead."

The healer collapsed to the ground in terror.

"This humble servant will do everything... everything possible!"

The Emperor ignored him.

He sat beside the bed.

For the first time since ascending the throne, he felt powerless.

No decree could wake her.

No order could pull her back.

No punishment could threaten fate itself.

He bent slightly, his forehead nearly touching the back of her hand.

"You said I was cruel," he whispered.

"You said I only knew how to punish.

So wake up.

Let me be cruel again.

At least then... you'll be alive."

Outside, the wind stirred the curtains.

Inside, the Empress remained silent.

Two Courtyards, Two Truths

In Lady Chen's courtyard, soft laughter continued over tea and sweets.

In the Empress's courtyard, the Emperor sat unmoving, guarding a woman who might never open her eyes again.

Two women.

Two courtyards.

Two very different worlds.

And somewhere in the shadows of the palace, something unseen watched both.

The palace gates stood tall, cold, and merciless.

Two rows of imperial guards blocked the path like a wall of steel. Their spears reflected the pale light of dawn, unmoving, emotionless.

Yao Qing arrived first.

She was dressed in simple commoner clothes, dust clinging to her hem from the long road. Behind her walked the twins, Lin Yue and Lin Chen, and the new man, Wei Jie. Their faces were tight with worry.

Yao Qing raised her hand and held up the imperial seal.

"This seal grants us entry," she said sharply. "We are here to see Her Majesty."

The guard captain didn't even flinch.

"By His Majesty's order," he replied coldly, "no one is allowed to enter the Empress's courtyard. No matter who you are."

Yao Qing's eyes burned.

"No one?" she snapped. "She is my friend! She is lying unconscious! And you dare block me with one sentence?"

The captain's voice remained firm.

"Orders are orders."

Lin Yue stepped forward, fists clenched.

"Do you know who you're stopping? We were with her when she built the Whisper Bowl. We've shed blood for her—"

The spear tip lowered slightly in warning.

Wei Jie held Lin Yue back.

"Arguing won't help," he murmured. "They're just following orders."

Yao Qing took a sharp breath, rage trembling in her chest.

"How dare he..." she muttered.

"How dare that dog emperor block even her family and friends when she's dying—"

Her voice cracked.

She took one step closer to the gate.

"If she dies and you stopped me today," she said hoarsely, "I swear to heaven I will remember every face here."

The guards did not move.

The Duke's Carriages Arrive

Just then, the sound of wheels echoed down the long stone path.

Two grand carriages rolled forward, banners of the Duke's household fluttering in the morning breeze.

The doors opened.

The Duke and Duchess stepped down, faces pale with fear and fury. Lian Rou followed, jaw clenched, eyes blazing. Little Lian Hua ran ahead, her face streaked with tears.

They rushed toward the gate.

"I am the Duke," he thundered. "Move aside!"

The captain bowed stiffly.

"Your Grace... by His Majesty's command, no one may enter the Empress's courtyard. Not even family."

The Duchess staggered slightly.

"You mean to tell me I cannot see my own daughter when she's lying between life and death?"

The guards remained silent.

Lian Rou slammed his fist against the stone pillar.

"If anything happens to her," he growled,

"I will tear this palace down with my bare hands."

The guards did not answer.

The silence was unbearable.

Lian Hua began to sob quietly, clutching the Duchess's sleeve.

"Mother... is Sister really going to die...?"

The Duchess held her tight, tears falling silently.

Anger Turns to Desperation

Yao Qing turned to the Duke's family.

"They won't let anyone in," she said bitterly.

"That man sealed the courtyard like a prison."

Lian Rou's eyes darkened.

"Then we don't ask," he said coldly.

"We go in."

The Duke grabbed his arm.

"You think this is a joke? This is the palace. One wrong step and we'll all be executed."

Lian Rou didn't answer.

Yao Qing suddenly let out a humorless laugh.

"Then what?" she snapped.

"We kneel and wait for her to die inside?"

Silence.

The palace gates loomed like a beast swallowing all sound.

Then Yao Qing's eyes sharpened.

She leaned in and lowered her voice.

"Let's distract them."

The Duke and Duchess turned to her in shock.

"What?" the Duchess whispered.

Yao Qing's gaze flicked to the guards.

"They're guarding the main gate. But guards are still human. Humans look where noise happens."

Lin Chen blinked.

"You mean... create chaos?"

Yao Qing nodded slowly.

"We don't fight them. We don't break in. We make them look somewhere else."

Wei Jie understood immediately.

"There are servants' passages behind the side garden," he murmured.

"If someone draws attention here... someone else can slip in."

The Duke hesitated.

"This is madness."

Yao Qing met his eyes.

"So is standing here while she dies."

The Duke closed his eyes for a moment.

Then he opened them, burning with resolve.

"Do it."

The Distraction

Yao Qing stepped forward suddenly, her voice rising.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN HIDE A DYING EMPRESS FROM HER OWN FAMILY?!"

The guards tensed.

She shoved the seal into the captain's chest.

"This seal is proof that she TRUSTED me! If she dies, I'll carve your names into my memory!"

Lin Yue followed immediately, shouting,

"This palace is heartless! Blocking a dying woman's family! What kind of emperor does this?!"

The Duke raised his voice, thunderous.

"Open the gate!"

The Duchess began to cry loudly.

"My daughter is dying! What kind of law blocks a mother from seeing her child?!"

The commotion drew attention.

Other guards turned. Servants peeked from behind pillars. Even officials nearby paused.

In that moment—

Wei Jie grabbed Lin Chen's sleeve.

"Now."

They slipped sideways into the narrow passage near the side garden wall, shadows swallowing them.

Lian Rou glanced at his parents.

"I'll go too."

The Duchess caught his sleeve.

"Rou—"

"I'll bring her back," he whispered fiercely.

He vanished into the passage with the twins and Wei Jie.

Inside the Palace — The Run

The corridors were long and cold.

Servants rushed past, carrying bowls of medicine and hot water.

The twins' hearts pounded.

"Which way?" Lin Yue whispered.

Wei Jie pointed.

"This way leads to the Empress's courtyard."

Footsteps echoed.

They ducked behind a pillar as guards passed, talking quietly.

"She's not waking..." "His Majesty hasn't slept all night..." "The healer says her pulse is fading..."

Lian Rou's face went white.

"Faster."

They ran.

Their breaths echoed loudly in the narrow corridor.

They reached the courtyard gates—

Two guards stood there.

Wei Jie inhaled sharply.

Then Lin Chen picked up a small stone and hurled it down the far hallway.

CRACK.

The guards turned instinctively.

"Who's there?!"

In that instant, the group sprinted past the open gate.

The Empress's Courtyard

The air inside was heavy with medicine.

The courtyard felt suffocating.

They froze at the door of her chamber.

Yao Qing's voice echoed faintly from the front gate outside, still yelling.

Inside, it was silent.

Lian Rou pushed the door open.

And saw her.

Lying pale and unmoving.

His sister.

The woman who once laughed with him under the peach trees.

His breath shattered.

"Lian An..."

The twins felt their knees weaken.

Wei Jie clenched his fists so hard his palms bled.

Inside the room, the Emperor sat beside the bed, head bowed.

When he looked up—

Their eyes met.

Shock flickered across his face.

"How did you—"

Yao Qing's voice rang out from outside, still causing chaos.

The Emperor stood slowly.

But before he could speak—

Lian Rou dropped to his knees beside the bed.

"If she dies," he said hoarsely,

"I don't care who you are.

I will kill you with my own hands."

The room fell into deadly silence.

The Emperor did not refute him.

Because for the first time—

He feared the same thing.